



THE SEQUEL TO
"DREAMING
OF THE
KNIGHT"
by SUSAN M. GARRETT

THE KNIGHT MUSIC

JUDE
WISGOTT

A Little



Knight

Music

JUDE WILSON



A Little Knight Music

A Forever Knight Story
a sequel to
“Dreaming of the Knight”

Written by
Jude Wilson

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Penguin
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Editorial

Jude Wilson

The following story is a *sequel* to "Dreaming Of The Knight" by Susan M. Garrett. If you haven't read it yet please stop and do so now. The set up, some of the flashbacks and Nick's guilt in "A Little Knight Music" will be confusing if you plan on doing it later. Do it now. Good, now that you've read "Dreaming" you can continue.

If there is one thing I've learned over the course of writing "Music" it is; never, *ever* read Susan Garrett fiction under the influence of drugs! My involvement in Forever Knight fandom is a direct result of doing just that. Please, let me explain: I had viewed all the American FK episodes before Susan, but she was brilliant enough to have purchased a copy of Forever Net I at MediaWest and read it before me. The rest, as they say, is history. Now, after I watched all the episodes I posted them back to Susan with a note, saying, I loved them but I was *not* was about to get involved in another fandom - no way, no how, No. About four months later, while I was recovering from oral surgery (when they say the pain isn't too bad don't believe them, they lie, it's agony!) Susan took pity, and to cheer me up, she sent along a copy of her manuscript, "Dreaming Of The Knight." When I surfaced halfway from the Tylenol and Codeine, I plunged into it, finishing about three in the morning. I took several more of the codeine and drifted off to sleep when the throbbing quieted down a bit. When I surfaced again, the first thing I did was call Susan and muffle something like: "Suthan, you can't leaf the stoy like thaf." Her answer was, "Yes, I can." The argument ensued with much laughter and giggling on Susan's part and a whole lot of indignation on mine. The upshot of it was, if I wanted a sequel, then I would have to write it. My answer was, "No, I can't." To which Susan said, "Yes, you can."

For about the past year I've been like the "Little Engine that Could" - I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. One day I found that I could - it was done. And many thanks are due many people: to Susan first and foremost, without whom I would not have started nor completed the project; to Don Bassingthwaite who answered my frantic e-mail messages for exact locations so very promptly and with no questions asked; to Karin Welss for being a good friend and great beta reader; to Sharon Himmanen for being such a sport - I knew I had done something right when she missed her stop on the subway at one in the morning coming from Manhattan. Yes, gentle reader that is when "This is my fish, this is my clue - *that* was my stop" was born! Sharon, your comments were invaluable. Patti Heyes for proofing yet again, Ann Larmier for doing such a terrific cover on short notice (yet again) for a fandom you don't really care for - just not her thing and that's okay too. To Marianne Glad for her assistance on EMT specialists, blood volume, etc. To Mary G.T. Webber, for just being Mary, for getting me going when inspiration was sagging a bit and for answering some technical medical questions. And for all the people on FK Fic and ForKni-L for just being there.

This one's for you.

P.S. I forgot to thank my boss. Why you ask? Well, without the loan of his powerbook on oh-so-many weekends this thing would *never* have seen the light of day. And to Susan's kitchen table and her abundant amount of hospitality. You're right, Susan, it *is* easier to write in Toms River, much fewer distractions. Now let's talk about that romance novel

Prologue

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is the music:—Do I wake or sleep?”

Keats, Ode to a Nightingale

Janette's attention to the increasing crowd of customers wandered. Perhaps it was due to the continuing winter storm controlling events in Toronto, or perhaps it was the recent trouble with Nicola. But then, there had always been trouble with Nicola.

Paris, ~1494

“I am bored, LaCroix.” Janette sighed as she glanced around the lavish salon.

LaCroix had purchased the sumptuous house in the fashionable outskirts of Paris on a whim. It was a large, rambling affair with enough land surrounding it to ensure their privacy. They had engaged a few servants and made an effort not to feed on them. After a time, the trio of vampires began to live a life of style and were often recipients of the most sought after invitations. But they had remained in this district far too long, and it was now summer; hot, humid and boring as the most exciting people had slowly drifted away from the city weeks ago.

“I'm not surprised,” LaCroix breathed as he opened the glass-paned door which led onto the garden. He remained silhouetted in the deepening twilight. “Where is Nicholas?”

“Out,” Janette replied. Nicholas had been ‘out’ for the past several nights and she failed to mention that he hadn't returned for his daylight rest, either. She flipped open her fan and waved it in front of her nose. “Shut the door, please,” she asked, changing the subject, “the stench of the city reaches even here.”

“Hmmm,” LaCroix hummed, “yes, it does, doesn't it?” He slipped the latch on the door, then turned and sat in a nearby chair. “Unfortunately, it makes it unbearably stuffy in here. Perhaps,” he tapped his finger against his teeth, his brow creased in thought. “Yes,” he finally said, “I think we should.”

“Should what?” Janette had risen and, waiting for his reply, leaned on the back of her chair. “I am famished, LaCroix,” she said, “tell me as we hunt. Can't you see I'm almost faint with hunger?”

“Madam,” LaCroix commented, as he stood and straightened his doublet and smiled his cat-like smile at her, “you are never faint with anything. But I hunger as well. Come!” he commanded, as he walked purposefully across the room. “I think we should collect Nicholas from wherever he has hidden himself this time, and leave Paris for the summer.”

“Where shall we go?” Janette strolled leisurely through the door and waited as LaCroix closed it.

LaCroix turned and studied her for a moment. A look of concentration drew his eyebrows together. “South,” he finally said, then nodded his head, “yes, south. Let's spend the summer in the mountains. We leave tomorrow night,” he ordered, taking for granted that Janette and Nicholas would obey. He was,

after all, their master, their leader. His will had made them immortal, his will had kept them together, and his will alone allowed them whatever freedom they now and would in the future enjoy. His will would guide them . . . always.

But they hadn't found Nicholas that night or for many, many nights thereafter. They searched until it became a contest of will with LaCroix. He *would* find his delinquent son and bring him back into the fold of his . . . family. Janette tired of the constant travel, night after night. But she said not a word either in defense of Nicholas or against him. She kept silent and kept her temper as LaCroix increasingly lost his. And, always they went south; south toward the Pyrenees. It was in the mountain area of Navarre, several miles north of Ochagavia, near the Salazar River, that they came across the vampire.

It wasn't Nicholas but a woman who had not fed in quite some time and didn't look as if she would feed this evening, either. The band of men were tossing her to and fro, ripping off pieces of her clothing as she passed from hand to hand. She made no move to defend herself.

"Stop!" Janette commanded. Her eyes glowed golden and her fangs descended as she strolled purposely near the camp fire. LaCroix hung back in the shadows.

"Ah, another pretty piece." His voice was low and gruff; he was short, muscular, black hair, black eyes, bearded and dirty. They were all dirty. Six bandits, living off the land and what they could steal either from the farmers living on the edges of the occasional village, or the travelers making their way to the solitary Santa Maria del Campo church for prayer and meditation. The bandits didn't look as if they prospered but they weren't going hungry at this time of year, either. A venison carcass hung from a nearby tree and it was missing a leg, a part of which was roasting on a spit over the fire.

All this Janette took in at a glance. "I said, let her be," she growled, as she captured the leader's gaze and held it. She could sense the others closing in a circle around her. They hadn't seen LaCroix—all the better.

"And who are you, my pretty morsel, to command Rogerio, a leader among men?" He flung the young woman to the ground and laughed, and as he did so one could see the missing and rotting teeth. He stepped over her and reached to take the collar of Janette's cloak. She brushed his hand away in shorter time than it took to blink, and if one listened closely one could hear the snapping of bones. He screamed in pain, holding his hand close to his chest. "Bitch!" he shouted.

Janette turned and grabbed the man closest to her. Sinking her teeth into his neck, she drank his blood ravenously. In a few minutes she let his dead body slip to the ground and smiled her own predatory smile as she reached for Rogerio. Her smile widened when she saw the shocked horror in his face and she chuckled when he made the sign of the cross.

She could hear the others muttering, "Holy Mother of God." Their terror was palpable and the stench of their fear nearly overpowering. She felt LaCroix patiently waiting, then he picked off the one closest to him, hungrily drink the man's life's blood away. She heard him chuckle softly as he reached for another.

Dragging a now screaming Rogerio over to the female vampire, Janette threw the body down before her. "Feed," she said softly. Rogerio attempted to crawl away but was stopped by Janette's leaden foot pressing down on the small of his back.

The woman stared back at her unmoving.

"Do it!" Janette commanded, then watched in satisfaction as the woman's eyes turned golden and she sunk her fangs into the dirty, greasy neck and drank.

Suddenly Janette whipped around and flew after another of the bandits and brought him back screaming, begging for mercy and repeated her command. "Feed!"

And the woman fed until she was lying on the ground, fully satiated. When Janette finally surveyed the camp site, she was not surprised to see that none of the bandits had survived. LaCroix raised his eyebrows in question as he delicately cleaned his lips of blood with his forefinger.

She turned back, knelt down to the young woman and brushed the hair from her face. "Your name?" she asked softly.

"Marnina," the young vampire replied. "Marnina Isaac."

Chapter One

The snow-filtered sunlight inched its way under her eyelids, then her arm emerged from the warmth of the covers to blot it out. The chill of the room caused goose bumps on her arm and had her grumbling, rolling to one side, burrowing her face into the pillows. Too late, her brain was activated and she was awake . . . barely.

Nick and his dreams. Well—she smiled, eyes closed, body stretching—her *own* dream . . . Purring, she recalled vivid parts of the landscape . . . the chasing, the teasing, the ultimate surrender of months and months of pent-up tension, frustration, passion. Oh God, if only . . . if only he'd cross that uncrossable line of his, if only . . . ad nauseam. Nice thought, good thought really, but Nick wouldn't and that was that.

Come on girl, time to face the day. Coffee to drink, shower to take, paper work to do, corpses to dissect. What a thought for a delightfully lazy Sunday morning. Snuggling in the afterglow of what Natalie liked to think of as "night music" was entirely more pleasant, even if it was only a great dream. An undefined male scent wafted from the sheets, the pillows, her hair.

Natalie sat bolt upright in bed, eyes wide, shock registering as she took in her cold surroundings. It wasn't a dream, it *must* be real. She knew where she was supposed to be and there she surely was. Nick's place, storm too dangerous for her to drive back across town to her own apartment; right, she remembered that much but what had made her sleep so soundly in Nick's bed, the couch was her usual haven against the coming dawn in the vampire's company?

Must have been the wine. Yes, the wine.

I didn't have any wine. Did I?

Odd, she couldn't remember drinking any wine. Irrelevant. Time; looking at her bare wrist—where the hell was her watch! As the black satin sheet slipped to her waist she decided to forget the watch—where the hell were her clothes! She peered over the side the bed, observing the trail of clothing. Panic. God, what a fool she must have made of herself! She had to get out of here, sit in the security of her own private enclave and sort the fantasy and reality of the last hours.

Finally dressed and wishing desperately for a shower, she tiptoed down the stairs and stood for a moment, eyes adjusting to the false darkness Nick managed to achieve for daylight hours. She watched him sleep or, more accurately, rest—the rest of the dead he called it—eyes closed, body prone, safely "resting" on the couch, clothed only in his black silk robe, left arm laying across his face. She knew nothing would wake him from his daylight slumber, yet she still tiptoed around. After a few moments of watching, she gathered her meager belongings, shrugged into her coat, checked to make sure she had everything, then stole away as if she'd never arrived the night before.

At noon she entered the snow-filled, white world of the latest storm. Two teenagers with shovels, herself with the small shovel she carried in the trunk of her car, forty bucks and one back-breaking hour of digging, lifting, tossing then rocking and pushing the car onto a main road managed to get her on her way. Two more hours of stopping, starting, inching her way farther and farther from Nick's loft to the safety of her own space. It was four o'clock in the afternoon before she finally pushed open her front door. A bath—a nice long, hot soak—was her main priority. Her back ached, her legs ached and she felt the cold to the depths of her soul. She decided the earth could open up, she could get fired, she didn't care . . . nothing could make her venture out again before this storm ended. She was tired of the snow, the

wind, the stinging cold. She picked up the phone and called the lab.

Her staccato message was spoken with relief into the voice mail recording: "Grace, it's Natalie. Roads are awful. I'm not coming in until this mess is over," she reported. "I'm home. Don't call me—I'll call you. See you probably tomorrow afternoon."

The trek to the bathroom felt like four miles instead of four feet. She turned the taps, added the salts and watched the water fill the tub, trying to keep her mind blank, trying not to think at all. Shivering, she assigned her wet clothes to one large heap on the bathroom floor, tested the rising water and inched her way into the hot soapy haven. Her last semi-conscious thought was the easing of her aching muscles, her back, her inner thighs. Nice dream, great dream . . . too bad it *couldn't* be real.

Nick's eyes snapped open; he was awake and his senses told him the winter sun had set hours before. He felt . . . rested, well, hungry. That deep, powerful hunger for . . . blood, human blood. He hadn't fed in . . . the bottled bovine blood in the refrigerator would be enough to slake the thirst, control the hunger.

Rising, he swiftly went to the refrigerator, grabbed the nearest bottle, spit the cork across the room, raised it to his lips and drank deeply. Neither the ice cold of the floor nor the chill in the room registered on his bare skin. Walking over to the couch, he set the now half-empty bottle on the table, sat down and surveyed his surroundings.

It was so quiet. There were no heartbeats he could hear yet something told him he should hear at least one. Nothing. Silence. Leaning back into the soft leather of the couch he closed his eyes. The smell of sandalwood, the feel of soft, smooth, mortal skin, the silkiness of her hair, the taste of cinnamon on her lips, bombarded his senses.

Ah, what a pleasant dream. Much nicer than the nightmares he'd been having the last week or so. Nightmares he now couldn't quite remember; nightmares he couldn't quite touch anymore; nightmares that were receding quickly beyond even his vampiric memory.

The dream of Natalie and their shared hours of mortal passion making everything clean and pure and right, making him feel whole and well and The ache in Nick's belly was real. The sob escaping from his lips as he doubled over was real. His heart's desire, to be mortal.

The ringing phone broke through his self pity. Schanke's insistence he take one more sick day and ride out the storm was accepted in a few terse words. "It'll improve your disposition as well, Nick. You've been a real bitch lately," he said, before hanging up.

Yeah, well, maybe it would at that, Nick thought, slamming down the receiver. He could hear the wind howling outside. He walked over to the table, picked up the bottle and downed the remaining blood in one long swallow.

Climbing the stairs he thought of a shower first to wash away the cloying scent of sandalwood. It made the dream too real, his mind said. It made the ache all encompassing, all involved. He needed to wash away the fantasy and focus on reality.

As if it would be that easy.

Several days later

Marnina Isaac Maxwell made her way down Yonge Street. It was late evening and the temperature

had dropped substantially since the gloriously bright and sunny afternoon. She liked walking, it was the only way to get to know the place you chose to settle. She thought briefly of the roaming from country to country down through the centuries; so many towns, so many people left behind. She sighed as she stopped for the light at the corner of Dundas. A leap would take her across the wide semi-circle of freezing slush and her thick soled boots would protect her from the remaining wet. She didn't like crossing water no matter how small the area.

She continued on her way crossing Queen. Stopping briefly at the corner of Richmond, she gazed up to the clear midnight-blue sky. So many stars and such a different view of the constellations from those of her youth. It was a long time ago, she thought, as she turned down Richmond, stopping across the street from the Raven. For a few moments, she watched as several people entered, before she crossed and walked purposely to the front door.

The vampire bouncer moved to bar her entry. Then he stepped aside, realizing she was one of the blood, and allowed her to cross into the dimly lit interior. Once comfortably seated at a back booth, she watched mortals and vampires alike gyrating to the loud beating music on the dance floor. Turning the untouched glass of Burgundy in front of her she thought about the young children of darkness sprinkled among the mortals among here. Did these foolish mortals know the danger they courted just by being here? Did they even care?

The lids came down on her chocolate brown eyes as she remembered her own sojourn in the darkness, her own beginnings. She thought of Cemal, so tall, dark, mysterious and forbidden. Ah yes, Cemal had changed her life and for a few short centuries, she'd wallowed in revenge for all the injustices inflicted on her people.

"You're new to Toronto?" Alma had cautiously approached the table of the newcomer.

"I have been here . . . some time," Marnina replied softly in French.

Alma arched her eyebrows staring down at the diminutive woman before her. "Waiting for someone?"

"Janette." Marnina turned back to explore the hidden depths of the dark red wine in front of her. She was well aware that she disturbed other vampires. To them, she had an aura which left a bitter aftertaste in their mouth.

"She'll be here soon," Alma replied and quickly moved away.

Marnina glanced at the retreating figure. She smiled knowing the unease she caused. Glancing again around the interior of the club she was struck anew by the youth clustered around her and the darkness they enveloped themselves in.

The Arabic man at the bar sent her senses spinning. It could have been a member of Cemal's family, yet she knew that was impossible; Cemal's ancestors had been eliminated many thousands of years ago, Cemal himself succumbing to the true death during the hated inquisition in the 1400's.

She closed her eyes and he was there, with her . . .

Cemal towered over her, broad in the shoulder and his hair black as jet. He stood behind her, massive hands resting on her upper arms and Marnina leaned back into his light embrace. He was forbidden and she treasured every fleeting moment he'd given her over the last several years. His unexpected appearance this evening had sent her whole body trembling. He wrapped his arms around her and slowly she turned to press her body against his. She lifted her face to be kissed.

"Such beauty." His hand gently pushed the head scarf to her shoulders, freeing her bound chestnut mane. "I could teach you many things." He kissed her deeply, his mouth glided to the side of her face, then to her ear and he whispered, "One day you will be mine."

His mouth grazed from her ear down her long neck and she found it difficult to breath, her heart pounding in excitement and fear.

Suddenly he pulled away and she was left shaking. He was gone, just as silently as he'd appeared. The emptiness threatened to tear her apart as she cried out in frustration.

Marnina pushed aside the memories with a mental shrug, deciding to face them at another time. Hiding her trembling hands in her lap, she searched the room for a familiar face.

Janette entered the club, knowing immediately who was there. Alma moved to intercept her as she walked the length of the bar. She held up her hand. "I know," she muttered, heading directly to the booth in the back.

"You." Janette removed her sunglasses and slid into the booth. Alma was only a few paces behind and quietly placed the goblet of blood wine on the table. "Thank you," Janette murmured.

Noticing Alma still standing guard, Janette added, "It's all right, Marnina Isaac is . . . welcome here." Alma nodded and left as Janette lifted the glass in a toast then took a small sip. "So, you still live."

"Yes, and it is Maxwell now, not Isaac." Marnina looked around the club. "Yours?" Janette nodded. This could never be a haven of her choosing, it was much too opaque and ominous. "You do well for yourself."

"I survive." Janette took a cigarette out and lit it, gaining a few moments of composure. "Why are you here? What," she continued as the smoke drifted from her mouth, "do you want?"

Marnina smiled. "It has been a long time, even for we of the blood, Madam Janette. Tell me about the years past, how you have been keeping yourself . . . amused."

Janette chuckled, and her eyes met and held Marnina's. "Ah yes, amusement is so necessary to endure the passage of time, is it not?"

Marnina tilted her head, studying Janette. "Is it? Talk with me," she said. "Tell me of your companions."

Janette toyed with her goblet for a few moments, looked directly into the brown-black eyes of the vampire sitting across from her. "Why?" she asked, crushing the cigarette out.

"Because I wish to know—because I *need* to know."

Janette thought for a few minutes, took a sip of the blood wine, then nodded. "Why not, what harm could it do now?"

For the next several hours they remained in the back booth. There came a time when the conversation drifted to silence. Marnina watched Janette carefully. "Tell me of Nicholas de Brabant. Is he still terribly unhappy, or has he finally accepted the darkness?"

"When has Nicola ever been happy?" Janette countered, with a sigh. "Darkness for him is now a disease and he's searching for a cure."

"And LaCroix?" Marnina finally asked. "Are you still . . . together? Is my debt yours," she paused for a moment, then continued, lifting her one eyebrow sardonically, "or his?"

Janette drew in a breath and let it out slowly before answering. "I—that is we, have not been in contact with LaCroix for many months now. The ties that bind us have been silent. As for your debt," at this Janette smiled in remembrance, "it was always due to LaCroix. But then, you knew that."


At last Marnina rose to leave. "Thank you, I will be . . . in touch." She left the club quickly, making contact with no other person.

Alma returned to the table as Janette rose. "There is something about that one." She shivered as she watched Marnina walked through the door.

Janette's smile was without humor and as cold as an arctic morning. "That one walks in the light."

Chapter Two

Midnight, twenty-one days later and the beginning of another storm

 quietly observing the man laying on the bed, Marnina bent down and retrieved her bag. Picking up her parka, she crossed to the door without a backward glance. The hallway was silent; she opened the door and slipped out, gently tugging it shut behind her.

She automatically turned away from the elevators and made her way toward the corridor which joined the north wing to the hotel's south wing. Finding the stairwell, she descended four floors, reentered the corridor, quickly located the elevator and rode it down to the main lobby. She went directly to the arcade, and meandered through shopping concourse, stopping now and then to window shop, heading in the direction of the subway entrance. Once there she dropped the requisite token into the slot and proceeded to catch the first train to arrive. There were enough people riding the night train for her to blend in, just another working woman coming off the four to midnight shift.

Her appearance was fairly nondescript, and a naturally pale complexion helped her to blend in with the rest of Toronto's mid-winter population. She just sat there, not talking with anyone, not looking at anything in particular, and got off four stops later.

At street level she began to walk. Keeping to the shadows, her step was with purpose but light, not hurried just steady. She walked north for a while, then turned east and walked for about a half-hour before turning south, picking up her pace. The snow didn't deter her and she seemed oblivious to the cold. Just before disappearing into the night, she wondered how long it would take hotel security to discover the dead body in room 1006, a calling card left for Nicholas Knight.

She shuddered inwardly. Calluori was just an innocent who found himself in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and saw something he wasn't suppose to see—tragic really. His memory couldn't be erased; they'd already tried. At least his death would be swift and he would never become one of the blood.

It started to snow again.

Chapter Three

Twenty-four hours later

Both Nick and Schanke were busy trying to put a dent in the pile of overdue reports when Stonetree shouted from his office, "Knight, Schanke!"

They looked up from their respective typewriters, simultaneously rising as they did so. Anything was better than the dull routine of paperwork.

"What's happenin'?" Schanke dropped into the chair and rolled the unlit cigarette in his fingers. Nick leaned against the door jamb.

"Dead male on the tenth floor of The Royal York Hotel. Manager's pretty upset."

"Can't imagine why," Schanke mumbled then shut up when Stonetree gave him one of his, 'Let's be grown up and serious' stares.

"Looks as if he's been dead for at least twenty-four hours. It's weird," Stonetree continued.

"How so?" Nick straightened from his own particular slouch.

"No blood."

"Wait a minute," Schanke blurted out. "Whaddya mean 'no blood'?"

"Just what I said, Detective. The manager says the stiff looks clean as a whistle and dead as a door nail."

"Drugs?" Nick asked.

"With a five-inch stab wound in the middle of his chest?" Stonetree countered. "Get down there and clean up the mess." He began straightening the papers on his desk. "Let's get this one under wraps before anyone knows what's going on and I have the Mayor breathing down my neck," he added, under his breath.

"We're outta here." Schanke rose and turned to Nick. "Come on partner, vacation's over. Don't worry, Cap, old wonder boy here will have this case solved in—" He stopped, finger pointed at Nick's face.

Nick pushed the finger aside and frowned. "Let's go. And I'm not stopping for crullers on the way."

"Spoilsport." Schanke dropped the cigarette into the trash and went to get his coat.

The ride over to the hotel was a lesson in the art of carrying on a one-sided conversation, with Schanke babbling and Nick muttering the necessary responses.

For Nick, the image of Natalie kept reappearing, so vivid and so real. How could he let it rest when all he had to do was close his eyes and she was there, beside him, sleeping with her head on his chest? He could feel her warm body, the silkiness of her hair . . .

"Earth to Nick," Schanke called.

"What?"

"Man, wherever you were it was definitely *not* planet Earth. You just passed the hotel." Schanke laughed as Nick stopped and made a quick right to go around the block. There was a soft dusting of snow; the air was crisp, dry and very cold. "You know," he burrowed down in the seat with his hands in his pockets, "Jenny loves this weather. Man, on Saturdays Myra has to force her to come in for lunch. But once you get older, you know," he looked over to Nick, "once you're out of the 'young and stupid'

age"

"Young and stupid?" Nick asked, as he pulled the car into the underground garage.

"Yeah, you know. That's what Myra and I call the early 20's—the 'young and stupid' phase. Anyway, once you get past it, winter isn't fun anymore. It's just a drudge time to get through and the older you get the longer winter seems to be. Know what I mean? Don't you feel that way sometimes?" Schanke climbed out of the car. "God *damn* but it's cold out!"

"Yeah, maybe." Nick sometimes wondered if he had ever emerged from Schanke's apt description of being young and stupid. His stomach began to knot as they rode the elevator to the tenth floor. Nat would be there. He *knew* she'd take this call.

The two policemen outside the door recognized the detectives and let them pass. Nick covertly watched Natalie as she bent over the body, making her usual, careful preliminary examination. She looked up and for a brief moment their eyes locked, then she turned back to the body.

"Hi," Nick said. Why did he, all of sudden, feel so . . . young and stupid around Natalie? This was crazy, he felt like he was going through his tormented adolescent phase and that, thankfully, had been over more than eight hundred years ago! Clearing his throat he continued, "What've we got?"

Natalie straightened and faced Nick as she pulled off her latex gloves. "Well, he's dead that's for sure. My guess is that he's been here for maybe twenty-four hours. Time of death is going to be difficult, but not impossible."

She checked to make sure Schanke was occupied, before lowering her voice to continue the conversation and turning back to the body. "I doubt you're gonna solve this one. Five-inch knife wound straight through the heart, no blood to speak of, and look at this." She gently turned over the corpse's arms.

"A French *croix*," Nick breathed. There were deep wounds on the dead man's forearms—one straight from the wrist to the elbow, one horizontal across the wrist and another several inches longer further up the arm.

"His neck is broken as well." Natalie carefully moved the man's head lightly from side to side by grasping his chin with two gloved fingers. "One of your friends?" she questioned Nick, with raised eyebrows.

"No," he whispered, then continued, more sure of himself, "None of us would be stupid enough to leave something as obvious as this." He paused, knowing full well that there *had* been one of his kind who might have done something similar.

Natalie eyed Nick for a moment before turning to the morgue attendants. "Okay, I'm finished with him for the time being." She moved carefully to the door. "I'll know exactly what killed him when I complete the autopsy."

"When?" Schanke asked.

"Probably sometime Friday. I've got a bunch whose numbers come way before his. Been a busy couple of days in the jungle, even with all the snow."

"Give me a call?" Nick watched her walk away, his preternatural senses reaching out to see what was troubling her, he felt there was *something* definitely coming between them. Hearing the familiar beat of her heart, he felt relieved. His eyes suddenly narrowed—there was a faint echo, something that should not have been there . . . but was.

"Sure," she called over her shoulder, as she made her way out of the hotel room.

"What's with her?" Schanke watched Natalie's retreating figure, his face scrunched in question.

"Huh?" Nick shook his head, then pulled out his notebook to start his preliminary investigation of

the crime scene. "Come on, Schanke, the techs'll be here any minute to tear this room apart."

"Whatever you say, super cop." Schanke looked over to Nick then back to the empty doorway. The tension between Nick and Natalie was obvious even to Schanke, and it was a tension that had nothing to do with the present crime. "Flowers would be nice." The words were out of his mouth before they'd even registered in his mind.

"What?!" Nick's look of astonishment was almost comical.

"I said," Schanke repeated, "give her flowers, say you're sorry for whatever you did and she'll be putty in your hands." He opened the briefcase on the dresser. "Seems to have been a pretty busy boy." He lifted the edge of the stack of papers with his pen.

Nick shook his head as he watched the technicians wheel out the body. "Come on, we've got work to do."

"Yeah, yeah," Schanke mumbled as he started making notes.

Schanke knew this case was going to need all the help it could get and that meant a whole team of experts crawling all over this room. He sighed, knowing he'd seen some pretty gruesome stuff in his time but this was a first—so brutal but so neat and, Stonetree was right, no blood. Shaking his head, he supposed anything was possible—there *were* some pretty sick wackos out there.

Natalie walked swiftly down the hallway, stopped at the elevator and stabbed the down button. Her hands trembled as she pulled on her leather gloves. She glanced back to room 1006.

What was wrong with her?

The elevator doors opened and she entered, turned and quickly punched the button to the lobby. It was only a dream, she repeated to herself for the fortieth time. Why was her psyche so unwilling to let it go?

"PMS," she mumbled audibly, "PMS."

It took her about ten minutes to reach her car and the ride over to the morgue was longer than usual. The daydream hit as she was waiting for a light to change, snow sprinkling her windshield, the wipers mesmerizing with their constant back and forth movement.

Lying naked beneath Nick, looking deeply into his blue eyes, she placed her arms around his neck and drew his mouth to hers

A blaring car horn startled her into moving her car forward immediately. This had to stop, she told herself, trying to slow her racing pulse. She began talking to the classical music coming from the radio.

"We're friends," she said forcefully, "that's *all*. Grow up, Natalie, you're not a kid anymore. Fantasy's great for a change but it's time to put it behind you and deal with the real world."

She'd had almost convinced herself again, by the time she got back to the lab, donned her lab coat, and started the autopsy on a forty-seven year old accident victim.

It was about two in the morning by the time Nick and Schanke returned to the station. The roads had been icing up again and the drive from the hotel seemed interminable. Nick went directly to his desk while Schanke stopped at the vending machine for a cup of watery hot chocolate.

"Want some?" Schanke called.

"No thanks." Nick was already feeding the paper into his typewriter. With his notebook laid open, he began his two-fingered version of typing, transferring the basic information. He looked up as Schanke sank into his chair. "Okay, what have we got?"

Schanke pulled out his own notebook. "One stiff, Michael Calluori; age thirty-five; married, two kids; in town for annual sales meeting. His district manager says Mike was a good employee, hard worker, straight. You know, happily married, loved his wife, the whole bit."

"Okay, then why's he dead?"

"Well, seems old Mike here picked up some chick in the bar. Bartender said he came in with some guy around ten or so; the friend left around eleven and Mike started making small talk with the chick at the end of the bar. Next thing he sees is old straight and narrow Mike walking out of the bar arm'n'arm with the babe heading for the elevators. Question was: his room or hers?"

"What do we know about the female?"

"Not a lot. Short, with long reddish-brownish hair, looked to be in her early twenties, kinda pretty but strange."

"How so?"

"Well," Schanke stopped and leaned back in his chair, "she came in alone—no big deal, but she sat at the end of the bar for about two hours all alone—like she was waiting for someone. She bought one glass of wine and never touched a drop of it. At one point our bartender friend tries to make some small talk—no go. Then Mr. Straight-and-Narrow walks through the door and she lights up like a Christmas tree, almost as if she'd been waiting for him"

"We got a name on her?"

"The bartender overheard her introduce herself as Marnina Maxwell. And with that I'm outta here. It's been a long day that stretched way over. I'll go back to the hotel tomorrow before I come in and see if I can get anything further on the broad. We should have Natalie's autopsy report by then."

"See ya tomorrow," Nick said as Schanke rose and tossed the empty paper cup into the basket. "I'll call Natalie before I leave to see if she has the preliminaries done and can give us at least a cause of death."

"Take my advice," Schanke was shrugging back into his coat, "go over there with the biggest bouquet you can find and say you're sorry."

The incredulous look on Nick's face made Schanke laugh. "God, you single guys are so dense sometimes. Don't worry, super cop, you'll figure it out one of these days. I'm history," he called, as he headed for the door.

Nick sat looking at the half-finished report, wondering. There was something about this murder that set off sirens in his head. That it was a vampiric killing he was sure—he could feel it, smell it. Who, though, would be stupid enough to carve up a body like that and then leave it for the whole world to find?

And . . . Natalie? Schanke was right, there *was* something amiss with their relationship, or definite lack thereof.

Stonetree interrupted his musing as he wandered through the office. "These are pretty ugly, Nick." He tossed the envelope of photographs on the desk.

"It was worse in real time." Nick fanned out the stark black and white pictures.

"Occult sacrifice, you think? What's that?" Stonetree pointed to the photograph showing the under side of the victim's arms.

"Maybe," Nick studied the particular shot. "Looks like somebody's interpretation of a French croix."

"A what?"

"A French cross, you know . . . like the Cross of Lorraine."

"Oh yeah, right. What's it mean?"

"Don't know," Nick shuffled the photographs together and returned them to the envelope.

"Well, find out. What are we dealing with here—terrorist group, a group with a political agenda, Chinese Tong?—find out. What did he actually die of, do we know yet?"

"Probably the knife wound to the heart, but we'll know definitively when the autopsy report comes in," Nick said.

"When's that gonna be?"

"Probably sometime today or tomorrow. Natalie said they were pretty backed up but would get to it as soon as possible."

"Okay," Stonetree said heading toward his office. "Let's wrap this one up quick if we can, I don't want the Mayor breathing down my neck again. And Nick," he added, "let's keep a lid on it, okay?"

"You got it, Captain," Nick replied as Stonetree closed the door to his office. Nick opened the envelope again and took out the photographs, looking at each one in turn. When he came to the shot of the victim's arms he stopped and studied it. There it was again, he was sure it was a carving of a French croix on a human arm. It meant something, he was sure, but what?

Grace walked into the lab and looked over to where Natalie was sitting at her desk with her head in her hands. "You okay?"

"Just tired, Grace," Natalie looked up with a wan smile on her lips.

"Why don't you knock off early then? You certainly have the time coming." Grace leaned against the stainless steel table with her arms folded over her ample chest.

"You playing mother now?" Natalie chuckled. "I'm okay. I want to at least get the preliminaries done on our latest murder victim. Let's wheel him out and get the blood and tissue samples done. I'll do the autopsy when I come in tomorrow. How's that?"

Natalie stood up and swayed as the world suddenly began to fade. Feeling Grace's hand clamped on her upper arm she grabbed the edge of her desk and took several deep breaths, then opened her eyes wide. "M okay," she said, took a deep breath and smiled into Grace's liquid brown eyes. "Honest, must have stood up too fast, that's all."

Just then Nick walked through the door carefully carrying a white deli bag. "Hi," he said. Looking at Natalie with Grace's hand clamped on her arm, he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah." Natalie pulled out of Grace's grasp. "Floor's a little wet and I almost slipped, that's all. Something I can do for you?"

"Hmm," Grace murmured. "Hi, Detective. Call me when you're ready, Natalie," she said, retreating from the lab.

Nick turned and watched Grace leave. "What's with her?"

"Just tired, I guess. We're all tired around here. What's up?" Natalie turned back to her desk and began shuffling papers.

"Here," Nick shoved the white deli bag toward Natalie. "I brought you something."

Natalie took the bag and peered at the contents.

"It's cappuccino and a chocolate buttered croissant," Nick said, with a sheepish grin.

"My favorite."

"Yeah, I know."

Natalie's stomach began to churn. "Um, I'm getting ready to pack it in here—okay if I save it 'till I get

home?"

Nick eyed Natalie with concern. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You know old indestructible me." Natalie's words came out in a rush, as if she was trying to convince Nick as well as herself. "I'm just tired, that's all. Eight hours sleep and I'll be great."

"You didn't start on our latest murder victim, did you?" Nick switched to the business at hand.

"No, I was just going to send out the blood and tissue samples before I left. I'll do the autopsy first thing tomorrow. I should have a report to you by the middle of your shift, okay?" Natalie had moved around Nick and pulled out the slab with Mike Calluori on it. She pulled away the sheet then crossed the room to pick up the tissue slides.

"Sure. Guess I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Yeah, tomorrow," Natalie had her back to Nick so he wouldn't see her trembling hands. When she heard the door open she turned. "Nick?"

He looked like a child who'd just been scolded for doing something bad. "Thanks," she said and smiled.

"Not a problem." The door whooshed shut behind him and Natalie felt the burning tears threatening to spill.

Grace strolled back into the lab. "You got those samples yet?"

"Yeah," Natalie wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, "right here. I just have to label them." She picked up a pen and started writing the adhesive tag.

Nothing significant slipped by Grace. "Okay, what's wrong?"

Natalie sighed, "Nothing. Really, there's *nothing* wrong. Guess it's just a bad month for PMS, you know? One minute I want to scream at the world and the next I want to sit down and bawl my eyes out." She heaved another sigh. "This too shall pass, as the old saying goes."

"That it shall, child," Grace smiled knowingly, "only to plague you again next month or the month after." Picking up the samples she gave Nat a hug. "Go home, take a hot bath, have a stiff drink and sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up."

"Sounds like heaven." Natalie shrugged out of her lab coat and reached for her purse. "Here," she pointed to the white deli bag that Nick had brought her, "you might as well take this, it'll be cold and soggy by the time I get home. I have to stop and get cat food on the way."

"Thanks." Grace picked up the bag with her free hand. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, tomorrow." Natalie followed Grace out of the room and flipped the light switch just before the door whooshed shut behind her.

It was the early light, just before dawn, when Nick rode the elevator to the loft. He tossed his keys on the table, went to the refrigerator and grabbed one of the green bottles just as the door was closing. As he walked to the window, he removed the cork from the bottle and took a long swallow of its contents. Staring at the coming dawn, fingering the cork in his hand, an acute hollowness engulfed him and the loft's echoing stillness only reinforced how truly alone he was. He turned, suddenly sure she was there and the dream began to replay . . .

"What about what I want . . . " Before he could move, Natalie stepped up to him, wrapped her arms around him again, and kissed him full on the lips, her tongue reaching into his mouth to

explore its depths

A blood tear slipped down his cheek. The burning light of dawn pushed him away from the window. He reached for the remote, punched the button and the shutters began to close, plunging the room into midnight darkness.

Bottle in hand, he trudged up the stairs to his bedroom, looking forward to the blessed oblivion of sleep.

Chapter Four

Marnina Maxwell sat on the seat of the living room bay window, watching the coming dawn. There were hollows beneath her eyes and she felt an abyss tearing her soul apart. Jonathan silently slipped beside her, wrapping his powerful arms around her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" A worried expression hardened the planes of his face, making his jaw more square.

Marnina rested her head on his arm. "You are so very good for me, do you realize that? You protect me from myself."

Jon nuzzled her neck, whispering, "I'd protect you from the rest of the world, if you'd let me."

"Ah," Marnina smiled, arching her neck in appreciation and rubbing her face along the side of his head, "chivalry is not dead, is it my true knight? No, it is not the world I fear, my love, only my true self, and my onerous past which has the bad manners to intrude on my future."

For the past ten years Jonathan Green had been Marnina's companion and lover. He knew exactly what she was, and accepted what would happen to him when he died. He was her friend, her confidant, her partner. There was no pretense, no lies. That was why she had to tell him the sin which was laying so heavily on her soul. Oh, how she missed the ability to weep.

"I participated in someone's death," she confessed, staring straight in front of her.

Jon's arms tightened slightly. "When?"

"A few nights ago."

"Did you . . . ?"

"Does it matter?" she looked up and over her shoulder to see into his steel blue eyes. What did she see there? Disappointment? "It was a long standing debt, you see—a debt that is now paid . . . with quite a generous gratuity thrown in, I might add." She continued to study his face, watching, waiting for a look of revulsion she was sure she would see and never did.

Jon rested his cheek on Marnina's head, he found the heady scent of her intoxicating. "How do you feel about it?"

"Dirty, so . . . so . . . dirty." She turned in his arms so she could rest within its comforting confines.

"Tell me?"

For several long moments she was silent, the flat of her palm resting on Jon's chest. "Perhaps it's time." She sighed and pushed herself away so that she could look and watch his facial expression more carefully. "I have never told you about my time in the darkness, have I?"

"No," Jon stated simply. "I've no need to hear it now either. I know," he rubbed his chin and looked out the window, then back to Marnina, "or I can guess, that it was pretty bad. So I never pushed. You know?"

Marnina smiled her very sad smile. "I must have done something very good at some time to deserve some one like you. But," she took a breath and tightened her fingers around her knees, "you should know what it was like, for me anyway."

"Why now?"

"Because if there is one thing I've learned over the centuries it is that there is never enough time and I have put off the telling long enough."

Marnina had pushed herself into the window seat, her back resting against the wall, her knees drawn to her chest, and for a few moments she sat watching Jon. She found that, as always, his presence was pleasing and comforting, supporting. What would she do, she wondered, if he left her as he ultimately might when he crossed over? Putting the thought aside, she began to tell him her story.

"I was born in the year nine hundred and twenty-five in a place then known as Ispamia, or Spain as we now know it. I was . . . a Jew, a Sephardic Jew."

"And I am Jonathan Green, a man who loves you very much, one with no religious affiliations anymore. I was born in the year nineteen hundred and fifty-four, in a small community hospital in Queensland, Australia." He touched her face, his smile was sad. "I've always had such a weakness for older women," he said softly.

"Yes, I know." She smiled as she rose from the window seat. "Would you like me to make you some coffee?"

"I think, my love," Jon reached for her hand and smiled sadly, "you're just trying to delay this. Come back, let's talk."

"You are right, as always." Marnina retook her seat but out of Jon's reach. She drew her knees to her chest and began the journey back to the time of her rebirth into the world of darkness.

"My father, Judah ben Isaac, and my Uncle Samuel were members of the Radhanite merchants—they traveled extensively throughout the known lands. We lived in the city of Córdoba and maintained as good a life as a Jew could during those uncertain times. When the land was under Islamic law, we Jews had a certain amount of freedom and my family more than most because the goods we traded were highly desired by the Islamic rulers. By the time I was thirteen, I had already learned Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic, plus an early form of Spanish, which was the the common language. Later, I would learn Greek and Persian. My brother, Isaac, traveled with my father and my other brother, Moses, took care of the business at home while studying to become a rabbi.

It was the eve of my thirteenth birthday that I first encountered Cemal."

Marnina's voice softened as her mind drifted to a time long past.

Chapter Five

Schanke drove away from his house in the suburbs at noon the following day, not fully rested but at least awake and alert. In the past year and a half, since Nick Knight had become his partner, he had put in more double shifts than probably all the detectives on the entire Toronto beat. Myra was right, it had to stop. Maybe it would be easier for everyone if he had himself permanently assigned to nights since Nick was physically unable to work days. Maybe.

He pulled into the parking garage next to the hotel, locked his car and trudged into the hotel. Manager first, bar second, restaurant third. Maybe he'd treat himself to lunch. Wonder if spanakopita was on the menu, he thought.

Thomas Winchester (the second) sat across from Schanke looking down his oh-so-proper nose at the Toronto police detective. "How can I help you, Detective?"

Schanke's thick skin didn't even bruise, the manager's attitude rolling away like so much melted snow. "Can you tell me if there's a guest registered in your hotel by the name of Marnina Maxwell?"

The manager turned to the computer terminal on his credenza, typed in a sentence or two, waited for a few moments, then replied, "There is no one presently registered by that name." He hesitated after striking another key, then added, "Nor has there been anyone by that name in the past month."

"Okay, I'll need a copy of the deceased's bill and a listing of the calls made from his room," Schanke asked, making check marks in his notebook. "We're also going to need a list of housekeeping and maintenance staff that were on duty during the period of eight a.m. Saturday to midnight Wednesday, and the names of the occupants of the rooms adjacent to 1006."

Winchester drummed his fingers on the polished surface of his Victorian desk as Schanke rattled off his request. "If you can wait a few moments, I can have Mr. Calluori's bill for you, which would include a listing of all telephone calls made from that room. The other lists will take a little time. Why don't you come back, say—" he glanced at the ticking clock on the mantle of the fake fireplace across the room, "around six o'clock?"

"Fine," Schanke said, flipping his notebook closed. "I'm gonna wander over to the coffee shop, maybe one of your waitresses noticed the suspect."

"It's the lunch hour, Officer Schanke. Do try not to be too disruptive."

"Oh, I'll do my best." Schanke gave the obnoxious manager his best smile, then turned to go. "I'll stop by before I leave for whatever you have ready."

"I'm so looking forward to it," Winchester muttered under his breath, as the door closed.

Nick sat bolt upright in bed, he'd been dreaming again and he was frightened. Why? After swiping his hand across his forehead, he could see the blood sweat on his palm. He got up and stumbled to the bathroom to wash his face. He padded downstairs, went to the refrigerator, grabbed one of the green bottles then reached up for a goblet from the cupboard above and made his way to the couch. Sitting down, he poured himself a generous portion of bottled bovine blood.

The dream. What was it that frightened him so? He leaned back into the soft leather cushions, tried to relax and recall at least portions of the dream. The image of a strange looking wicker doll appeared

when he closed his eyes and immediately his hands started to tremble. The phone rang, shattering the image.

"Yeah?" he answered.

"Hey, Nick," it was Schanke. "Sorry if I woke you."

"It's all right. What's up?"

"I got my friendly bartender down here with the police artist group trying to come up with a picture of the suspect. Thought we could pass it around the hotel staff when he's through, see if we can get a positive ID on our mystery lady."

"Good thinking." Nick took another sip from the goblet. "Any word from the Coroner's office?"

"Nada. Natalie left word that she wanted to do the autopsy herself and she's not in yet. Hey," Schanke paused, then continued and Nick could tell he was chewing something, "do me a favor, will ya?"

"Schanke, I wish you wouldn't chew while you're talking on the phone, it's disgusting. Whaddya want?"

"Oh, right, sorry." Schanke stopped, and with his acute hearing, Nick could hear him swallow. "On your way in, stop by the hotel and pick up a bunch of lists I asked the hotel day manager for. With any luck he'll be off duty—he's a real piece of work, know what I mean?"

"Yeah. What time is it now?" Nick didn't bother to look at his watch himself, but propped his feet on the coffee table, leaned back into the couch and listened.

Schanke didn't answer right away, and Nick listened to him swallowing something else. Did the man ever stop eating? "Three o'clock," Schanke finally answered.

"I should be there by six, unless I stop by the Coroner's office first. I'll call Nat before I leave and see if she has anything for us. If not, why don't you meet me at the hotel. Between the two of us we can cover the whole place in one fell swoop."

"Sounds good to me. Later," Schanke said, and hung up.

As he lowered the receiver back into the cradle of the phone, Nick's thoughts drifted to the tension rising between himself and Natalie. Was she seeing someone? Was that it? What had he said or done to offend her now? Maybe he should call her and invite her to dinner and a movie. Maybe he should be honest and come right out and ask what he had done so they could clear the air and get back to normal again.

Nick sighed, rose from the couch and headed for the stairs. Maybe he should just leave it alone and keep his mouth shut. Maybe it would just go away.

Natalie woke to the ringing of the phone, and grabbed for the receiver before her answering machine kicked in. "Lambert," she answered.

"Nat; Nick. You're late."

"Shit!" Nat exclaimed then flopped back to the pillows. "What time is it?"

"Four-thirty. Ah, I guess you're not on your way in yet, are you?" he asked.

"How perceptive of you." Nat sighed. "Oh, God, how I hate to get up in the morning."

"Ah, Nat," Nick was giving his best shot at humor, "it's afternoon."

It fell flat. "Yeah, you're right."

After a pause of several long, silent seconds, Nick stumbled out words Natalie would rather not face right now, "Ah, Nat, are you mad at me?"

"No," she answered slowly, as her stomach twisted into the familiar knot. "Should I be?"

"You tell me." Nick paused, and when the silence seemed as if it would go on indefinitely, he added, "Well, ah, call me when you finish Calluori, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Natalie hung up the phone without saying good-bye. "That wasn't very nice of me, was it, Sydney?" She was talking to her cat again. Petting Sydney and listening to his soothing purr, she thought about Nick and their definitely strange relationship.

"I think it's good you're seeing someone . . . if I'm not careful I'll get in the way of you and your happiness . . . and what's the reward for you, Doctor, what could you possibly expect in return?"

The images slipped through her consciousness like a slide show. "Oh, Sydney," she continued, stroking the cat, "I'm such a jerk." The thought occurred to her so suddenly it took her breath away: she'd do *anything* for just one long night spent in Nick's arms.

Natalie pushed back the covers and got out of bed. Grabbing her robe she headed for the kitchen when the world began to grow dim. She quickly sat down and put her head between her knees. Slowly, ever so slowly, with a familiar ringing in her ears, the living room came back into focus. "What's the matter with me?" she gasped, as she leaned back in the chair taking deep breaths.

After a few minutes she got up, went to the kitchen and started the coffee brewing. Picking up the phone, she punched in the numbers to the morgue.

"Grace? It's me, Nat. Yeah, I know, I overslept. I should be there in about," she paused to look at the clock, "an hour and a half. Do me a favor, will ya? See if you can get someone to cover for me tomorrow, I've got some appointments and need the day off. Thanks. See you later."

Replacing the receiver, she looked down to watch her cat twist himself around her legs. "Well, Sydney, what do you think?" Sydney continued to rub himself against her leg, as silent as ever. "You're not saying. Smart."

She grabbed her cup and poured the strong black coffee. It was hot so she carried it to the bathroom, it should be cooled enough by the time she finished her shower.

Natalie was showered and dressed by the time she had finished the coffee. The oh-so-familiar twisting of her stomach hit as she started to put on some lipstick. She got to the toilet with milliseconds to spare, before her system heaved the coffee.

She sat on the bathroom floor in a cold sweat, her limbs trembling, trying to quell the resulting dry heaves. Sydney came in and settled himself on her legs. She picked him up and started to pet him again. "Something's wrong with me, Sydney, and I really can't afford to be sick right now. Then again," she said with resignation, "there never is a good time to be sick, is there?" Maybe, she thought, Charlie, her internist buddy from med school, would be willing to see her on a Saturday morning.

Chapter Six

It was the evening of my thirteenth birthday and the return of my father and brother after a year of travel, when he first appeared." As Marnina spoke, her eyes were focused on some distant spot of her past. "There were many people packed into our house and it was so hot that I slipped to the roof for some air and quiet."

After a few moments of silence, when it appeared that she might have drifted off into herself, Jonathan softly prompted, "Was he there?"

"Hmm," Marnina nodded, the curve of her mouth drifting into a smile. "I didn't see him at first, it was very dark. I sat in the shadows, just watching the night sky. . . ."

Cemal el Kareh was a tall man for his time, rising to a height of about five feet, eight inches. His thick hair was the color of jet, his almond shaped eyes were as black as the darkest night; his lean, sinewy body was hidden by the flowing burnoose. His skin was the color of pale, aged ivory as it should be, for Cemal el Kareh was a vampire of indeterminate age.

Silently, he stepped from the shadows and stood behind the young girl. "Lovely, isn't it?" he murmured.

"Oh, yes. It is so beautiful. I wish" She was not afraid of the newcomer to her world. She instinctively knew he meant her no harm, wanting only to be her friend.

"What do you wish, child?" She could not see the amused smile playing on his sensuous lips for he made sure that his face was hidden in shadow.

"I am *not* a child," Marnina Isaac stated firmly. "As of today I am a *woman*."

"Ah yes, please forgive my ignorance." He stepped forward and bowed like a member of the Umayyad caliph's court; his smile made her tremble in anticipation of what she could only guess, and his eyes danced with humor.

Marnina tilted her head in acceptance of his apology, but was smiling in spite of her indignation. He was a stranger and a Muslim, yet she didn't fear him. How could someone so handsome mean her ill?

"Who are you?" She had switched from Spanish to Arabic. "A friend of my father's?"

He arched his eyebrows in surprise at the sudden change in language. "You are well spoken for one of so few years and a maid at that." His response was in Hebrew, the twinkle in his eye as bright as one of the stars in the night sky.

Marnina stood and dusted off the length of her mantle, looking up at him, unafraid. "You are surprised? You shouldn't be if you know my father. He would not permit any of his children to dwell in ignorance." Her response had been in Latin, her smile one of triumph.

His laughter shattered the stillness of the night air and he bowed again. "Again, my apologies." He grew somber. "I must leave now and you must return to the celebration."

"Leave?" Her heart raced in panic. "No, don't leave. I—I don't even know your name."

He stared deeply into her eyes, his hand reaching out to the side of her face. "So lovely," he murmured.

When she reached up to take hold of his hand she found that his touch chilled her soul. Still, she wanted him to stay and pleaded when he pulled away and turned to leave. "Please?" Her soulful brown eyes matched the pleading tone of her voice.

He turned back, his eyes so full of sadness that her heart shattered on impact. "My name," he

paused, "is not important. Farewell."

He disappeared in a blink of an eye

Jonathan knew instinctively that the man Marnina described with such reverence was her long dead master. "When did you see him again?"

Chapter Seven

Schanke walked through the lobby of the Royal York Hotel and plopped himself down in one of the comfortable leather chairs, closed his eyes and waited for Nick. About five minutes later he looked over to find Nick lounging in a chair beside him.

"Damn," he said, "I wish you wouldn't sneak up on me like that!" Schanke started looking around, as if really seeing the place for the first time. "You know," his gaze was locked on the crystal chandelier, "the newer hotels can't hold a candle to places like this."

"Hmm." Nick stared at the crowded registration area, his own mind drifting along a different path.

"Makes me think of what the old hotels in Europe must be like. You know, dark paneling, high beamed ceilings, the plush red carpet . . ."

Schanke's voice drifted until Nick couldn't hear him anymore.

He placed his hands on Natalie's shoulders and hugged her tightly . . . leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers lightly . . . then she pushed forward, her mouth covering his. The warmth he was willing to kill for was in his arms.

"Natalie!" his mind screamed, as he doubled over.

". . . And you have to admit, the rooms are gorgeous. I hear they have some great weekend rates, maybe Myra and me'll . . ." Schanke turned to Nick. "Hey, partner, you okay?"

"Yeah," Nick gasped, "just a cramp." With some effort, he straightened in his chair. "Gone now."

"You sure? You know, you look kinda pale—well, we're all pale, it's winter, right? But you look paler than usual." Schanke's worried frown distorted his face for a moment. "You gotta kick that micro-whatever diet of yours and start eating some real food. You sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, really." Nick ignored Schanke's remark about real food. "This place has seven restaurants and four bars that we haven't hit yet. Somebody *must* know something. And we have to pick up those housekeeping lists."

"I'll get the lists and do the bars; you start on the restaurants and I'll catch you later." Schanke stood, looking down at Nick. "You sure you're okay?"

"Schanke, I'm *fine*. Let's get started before we're here all night." Nick also stood and pulled out his notebook.

"You got it!" Schanke headed toward the manager's office as Nick headed for the first floor café.

It was shortly after nine when Nick and Schanke met outside the seventh and fanciest of the hotel's restaurants. It was obvious that business was slow probably due to it being mid-week and the blizzard-like conditions outside. The early dinner crowd had already finished and there were a few late diners just being seated. Once they introduced themselves and quietly explained their purpose, the maitre d', Mr. Eric Mark, quickly ushered them to an out-of-the-way table.

Mark studied the drawing. "I remember her very well."

"Great! What can you tell us about her?" Schanke asked, his pen poised ready to take notes. "How long ago did she come in? Was she alone? Did she pay with a credit card and which one, or cash? Would you still have a copy of the receipt?"

"She was quite lovely." Mark sighed, ignoring Schanke's questions and looking across the table to Nick. "So . . . delicate. Quiet, poised and polite. Foreign—yes, I'd definitely say she was foreign, but from where I haven't a clue. A real lady of quality, know what I mean?"

"Ah, no, not exactly," Nick replied as he squirmed a little in his seat. "I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her yet."

"Ah, excuse me," Schanke interrupted, "can we get back to the point? I'd like to get home, you know, sometime this century?"

"Of course." Mark's back was ramrod straight—he held himself stiffly in the chair, his smile condescending, as he laid the sketch aside. "She came in late last week—Friday, I believe—with Jonathan Green." He looked expectantly to Schanke and Nick, and when they both remained silent, he said, "*The Jonathan Green*. Excuse me."

A waiter had quietly set a silver plate down in front of Mark with a bill laying on top. Mark picked up the bill, studied it, then signed it. "Yes, yes," he said, waving the waiter away, "that's fine."

Schanke rubbed his chin with his hand and gave Nick a questioning look. Nick gave him the barest shake of his head back, and Schanke turned back to Mark. "Ah, sorry, but who's Jonathan Green?"

Mark looked incredulously from Schanke to Nick, then back to Schanke. "Surely you jest?"

Schanke heaved a dramatic sigh. "Not a clue."

"Mr. Green is exceedingly wealthy. Do you not read the financial section of the paper?" Mark watched for some sort of reaction. "Obviously not," he mumbled, and continued. "Mr. Jonathan Green is one of the top ten financiers/entrepreneurs in the world; here, he's the President and CEO of the National Bank of Canada." Smug, Mark leaned back in his chair obviously waiting for the expected awe that extreme wealth brings. He was disappointed.

"So, okay," Schanke said after a moment, "who paid?"

"How crass," he stated emphatically, looking down his nose at Schanke. "A gentleman always takes care of the bill."

Nick tried to hide the mirth threatening to spoil what should be a very serious conversation. "How'd he pay?"

Mark focused his attention on Nick. "Cash. I remember because the bill was really not what it should have been."

"Huh?" Schanke looked up.

"It was so small." Mark looked at each detective for understanding and when he found none, continued. "Although the usual bill for dinner for two is really very reasonable."

"What's 'reasonable'?" Schanke asked, knowing full well that he'd probably never be able to afford it.

"Well, what with wine, somewhere in the neighborhood of perhaps three or four hundred dollars. Our menu is quite extraordinary. We have one of the finest wine cellars in eastern Canada. Their bill, if I remember correctly, was just over one hundred."

"Why?" Nick asked.

"Well," Mark began in an embarrassed undertone, "that was the reason I was asked to handle the transaction. You see, we were quite concerned because the lady here," he tapped his finger delicately on the police sketch, "failed to partake of our cuisine and, while, wine was poured for her, I doubt very much if any passed her lips. We thought, perhaps, she might be ill."

"What now?" Mark looked up at another waiter who had been patiently waiting. A bill was again placed in front of him, he studied it and then said, "No, no, this is all wrong. Find, Pierre, have him correct it."

Nick suddenly sat straight in his chair, staring at Eric Mark. "Was she?" he asked.

"So hard to get decent help these days," Mark replied. "Was she what?"

"What was wrong with her?" Schanke persisted.

"Oh. No, she was not ill. But I was quite concerned and mentioned to her that, perhaps, our menu was not to her liking. She assured me that it appeared to be quite fine, which is an understatement really, but that she had dined earlier and was just here to offer companionship to her friend. I asked her about the wine, hoping that it didn't offend, and again she assured me that it was probably excellent but that she didn't drink wine."

The small hairs on the back of Nick's neck bristled.

"You're telling me," Schanke asked, "that she came in, sat and watched her boyfriend go through a ten course meal and didn't eat or drink *anything*?"

"Actually he only had five, but yes, that is precisely what I'm telling you, Detective Schanke," Mark responded stiffly. "It is one of the reasons why I remember her so well."

"Weird," Schanke mumbled.

"And he paid in cash?" Nick asked, "You're sure?"

"Quite," Mark responded. "The whole situation was a bit of an embarrassment."

"That's it?" Schanke asked.

"What else is there, Detective Schanke?" Mark said turning his head, "They were only here for about two hours, he paid in cash and the only thing outstanding about the whole affair was the lady herself." He nodded appreciatively. "She was . . . beautiful . . . in her own way, of course."

"Explain," Nick asked, as he tensed unconsciously.

"Well," Mark leaned back into the plush cushion of the chair, "she wasn't your classic beauty, you know? Perhaps a bit too small, her mouth a bit too generous, eyes set too far apart, you know? But she had," he stopped, a dreamy expression on his face, his eyes half closed obviously trying to recapture the essence of a woman whom he'd served only last week. "She had an . . . ethereal quality about her. Yes, that was it. Have you ever met anyone like that?"

"No," Schanke responded, "can't say that I have."

Nick, on the other hand, gave a slight nod of recognition. Over the centuries, he had heard Janette described in the very same manner. He slipped his notebook into his jacket's inner pocket and rose. "Well," he said, as he handed Eric Mark his card, "if you can think of anything else please give us a call."

"Yeah," Schanke said, adding his card as well.

"Any time, gentlemen. Now, if you'll excuse me?" Mark rose and walked quickly away from them, heading in the direction of the wine steward, who was waiting for him across the room.

They walked out of the restaurant in silence and headed toward the lobby and outside. "Well that added up to a complete zero," Schanke said.

"Maybe," Nick mused. "Why don't you start on the hotel staff tomorrow. I'll have a look at this Jonathan Green. See what I find out."

"Okay," Schanke agreed. "It's only ten o'clock. Myra's gonna flip that I'm home early."

"Do the both of you good," Nick remarked as they neared the revolving door. "Give Jenny a kiss goodnight for me?" he smiled as he went through the door.

The cold air blasted Schanke, taking his breath away. "Sure. Catch up with you tomorrow. Damn, it's cold; think spring will ever get here?"

"Always does," Nick remarked. "See ya."

"Yeah," Schanke said and left Nick standing in front of the hotel.

Nick watched Schanke walk down the street for a few seconds before heading toward the parking garage and his own car. He thought of Marnina Maxwell and immediately the image of Janette surfaced.

He pulled onto Front Street and headed away from the precinct and toward the Raven. He had a feeling Janette could help him to locate his latest suspect.

Janette was preoccupied with her own thoughts, quite oblivious to the beat of the blaring music. She was perched on a bar stool, quietly sipping her blood wine mixture. What humor she still possessed for the evening ahead was soured when Nicola walked through the door.

He walked directly to her, completely unaware of the undercurrent of unwelcome generating from the young vampire crowd. Nuzzling her neck, he whispered, "*Mon petite*," sweetly in her ear.

Janette pulled away from him with a stern expression. "Nicola! What makes you think I would welcome you here before the new decade begins?"

Nick stepped back. "Now what have I done?" he asked patiently.

"What have you done?!" Janet exclaimed.

Nick was studying her with a look of complete surprise and confusion. "Janette, what are you talking about?"

"You come in here, get into a fight with Arthur," she scolded, as she nodded toward the bouncer, "trash my club, totally disrupt everyone, cost me a small fortune in free drinks, and now you ask me 'what have I done'? Really, Nicola!" Her temper was rising and with an effort she tried to control herself. "I think you had better leave. Right now you are not very . . . welcome here." She turned her back to him and motioned for the bartender to refill her glass.

"Janette," Nick said, softly touching her shoulder, "what are you talking about?"

Janette turned back and studied Nicholas for a few seconds. "You really don't remember, do you?" She sighed. "How very typical of the male of the species."

"Janette, whatever you're talking about, I apologize. If you give me the bill for the cost, I'll pay it. You know that," he pleaded.

"Oh yes, Nicola," she said, "you *will* pay. But for right now I think you had better leave until my temper cools. Come see me," she studied his face, "next month might be sufficient. Better yet, I will call you."

The bouncer silently stood behind Nick, obviously waiting for the word to throw out the club's unwelcome guest again.

Nick raised his hands in surrender. "Janette, I really don't know what you're talking about. Just one question and I'll leave—have you seen anyone new? Anyone of the . . . blood," he asked quickly, shrugging off the bouncer's hand, which now rested on his shoulder.

Janette held up her hand, telling the bouncer to wait, and looked at Nick with a slight air of distaste. "No," she stated truthfully. "I haven't seen anyone unknown to me. Now, I think you'd better leave. Quietly this time, hmm?"

Nick leaned forward and brushed a kiss on Janette's cheek, then turned quickly and left.

Janette watched him go, her ire cooling slightly. She realized that something was not right with Nicola. Oh yes, he could fake not remembering very well—in fact he usually did—but this time she felt sure he was not faking. He truly seemed to not remember the incident of a few weeks ago.

She decided to let him stew a while longer. Perhaps she would see him next week and find out just what else he did *not* remember.

Nick was walking through the door of the precinct as Natalie tossed a brown envelope on his desk. She turned just as Nick entered the squad room.

Shrugging out of his jacket, he asked, "That the report on Calluori?"

"Yep," she replied, as she started to make her way around him to leave.

He grabbed her arm to prevent her from leaving. "Natalie," he began, and let go when she looked from his hand on her arm to his face. She didn't smile and Nick could see the pain in her eyes. "What?" he whispered. "What have I done?"

Stonetree sauntered in and immediately Natalie focused her attention on him. "I finished Calluori," she said, before he could ask.

"Time of death?"

Natalie looked directly into Stonetree's eyes. "Somewhere between one and three a.m., Monday morning."

"That's a pretty narrow range."

"Piece of cake," Natalie said. "Since there wasn't enough blood left in the body for proper rigidity or lividity to set in, I examined the contents of his stomach, then made a couple of phone calls. Seems Mr. Calluori had dinner with his district manager, Pete Levine, and they ate pretty well; finished around ten. Contents of the stomach and partial digestion is consistent with the timing. One more thing—" She looked quickly to Nick, then back to Stonetree.

"What?" Stonetree asked.

"The arm wounds."

"What about them?"

"The incident occurred postmortem." Natalie avoided looking at Nick, focusing her attention on Stonetree. "In other words, whoever your murderer is, he, or she, left you his, or her, signature."

"Cause of death?" Stonetree stood staring down at Natalie, his hands on his hips.

"Stab wound to the heart, no question," Natalie replied quickly.

"What about the lack of blood?"

Natalie looked to Nick briefly then refocused her attention on Stonetree. "Well that's not hard, really, if you know what you're doing. Whoever it was probably wanted to make it look like some occult thing. All he or she needed to do was carry the body to the bathtub and pump out all the blood, or most of it anyway, then carry the body back to the bed. Easy as pie."

"She?" Nick's eyebrows rose and he chuckled at the thought.

"Why not?" Natalie shot back hotly.

"You think a woman, alone, could've done it?" Nick asked. He thought it was probably stretching the limits of credulity but was willing to play along anyway for Natalie's sake.

"Why not a woman?" Natalie shot back. "Any EMT specialist has to be able to carry at least double her own weight and there are a lot of female EMT's around. Besides which a lot of women work out in gyms now. And getting a hold of a pump wouldn't be all that difficult; any good medical supply store would carry one. It would be a good reason to carve up the arms that way too."

"Did you find any incision like that?" Stonetree asked.

"Couldn't tell, really," Natalie's eyes shifted from Stonetree's face to the clock, "the wounds on the arms were made with a serrated-edged knife—it's all in the report. I gotta go, guys, this one's all yours now."

"Thanks, Nat," Nick said, noticing Natalie's brittle smile as she turned and rushed out of the squad room. She hadn't lied, not exactly, just stretched the truth again. He had a glimmer of understanding now, and Schanke was wrong, flowers wouldn't even begin to make it up. Natalie hated stretching the truth, even for him.

"What's with her?" Stonetree asked, as he turned from Natalie's retreating back to face Nick.

"How am I suppose to know?" Nick mumbled, feeling grateful that blushing had not been in his purview for the last eight hundred years.

"Well, you're the detective," Stonetree snapped, a smile lighting up his eyes, "find out—and that's an order!"

Nick mumbled something totally incoherent then started on a different path. "Have you ever heard of a Jonathan Green?"

"Nick," Stonetree sighed, "the world is filled with Jonathan Greens. Can you be just a bit more specific?"

"This one is head of the National Bank of Canada."

"Oh," Stonetree's face went serious, "*that* Jonathan Green. 'Course I have. Why?"

"Well, our main suspect may have had dinner with him at The Acadian Room two days prior to the victim's death."

"Be careful, Nick," Stonetree advised. "Be real, real careful. Guys like that have guys like us for breakfast," he admonished.

"He has that much power?"

"Money," Stonetree answered with a shake of his head. "He has that much money. What's Schanke doing?"

"He's going to interview the hotel staff tomorrow, see if they can come up with anything else. He's also going to try and find the occupants of the rooms adjacent to the victim's, see if they heard or saw anything."

"Good," Stonetree said, "I want you to handle the Green thing. Go through the proper channels to get to him and *don't* accuse him of anything, just ask, real polite like. And don't look at me like that. I know you know what I'm talking about, but I don't want a charge of harassment coming down on you either."

"I hear what you're sayin', Captain," Nick agreed.

"Good," Stonetree said, then headed toward his office. "Keep me posted," he added, as the door to his office swung shut.

Nick stood and stared at the closed door for a moment before sitting down to read Natalie's report. The words began to swim on the page as he mind drifted again. He glanced to the large clock hanging on the wall. Only midnight and it felt like four in the morning, he had three hours to go to the end of his shift.

Things were not going well. Janette was mad as hell at him for some reason Nick couldn't fathom. Natalie was mad as hell at him—for a very good reason. And to make the situation completely unbearable, he had a lunatic vampire on his hands.

Oh God, he thought, elbows on his desk and his head resting in his hands, it couldn't possibly get worse.

Chapter Eight

It was the in-between time when most creatures of the night scurry to their resting places and mortals sink into the oblivion of REM sleep—most, but not all. Marnina and Jon were lying together in their large four poster bed.

Marnina, feeling almost safe, almost secure in Jon's arms, commented softly, "The police will question you."

"Yes," he replied with a slight nod, "I suspect they will."

"What will you tell them?"

"The truth." Jon rolled out of bed and reached for his robe. "I'm going to make some coffee," he said, as he leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Come sit with me?"

She smiled up at him. Immense feelings of love and wonder washed over her. Jon knew the truth of what she was, believed—truly believed—what would happen to him and how their relationship would change when he died, and loved her still. She never thought she would find such a love but she had and it was now in jeopardy because of the debt.

She reached up and wrapped her arms around Jon's neck and pulled him down on top of her. "I love you so very much," she said and kissed him ferociously, passionately and not for the first time during the night.

Only when their passion was again spent and they lay together, bodies entwined, silent for a few, precious long minutes, did Jon speak. "Tell me about Cemal."

"How quickly life changes," she sighed softly. "One year all is good, prosperous, healthy. The next everything is gone. Peaks and valleys." She smiled sadly in the darkness. "Peaks and valleys," she whispered, then continued her story.

Córdoba ~951

Marnina stared out of the window of the front room of the small house her family occupied in the center of the Jewish sector of Córdoba. She thought about her father, and wondered if tonight would be the night he returned. Master Isaac had been gone for a very long time.

Marnina's mother, Miriam, looked up from the fowl roasting on the spit over the fire. "Marni, set the table, please. We want everything ready so we can sit down to supper when we return from Temple."

"Yes, Mama." Marnina sighed as she stole one more glance down the emptying street. The house was divided into three sections; the front portion facing the street was used for business during the day, the back for cooking and family meals. The third was on the second floor and the family shared their sleeping quarters with the storage of goods being bought and sold.

Marnina turned away from the window thinking of the Sabbath. Every Friday night it was the same; the same supper, the same Temple service, the same conversation. Even now, the same empty places were set in hopes that her father, brother and uncle would return while they were out. When they did, Shabbas, or Sabbath diner, would be a noisy, crowded, joyous affair. Marnina sighed as she placed the ceramic plates along the rectangular table.

"Mama?" Marnina called.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Will we ever be able to obtain a larger house? After all, when Papa returns with the red silk cloth the Caliphate requested—"

"Marnina!" Miriam admonished. "We should be grateful and thank God every day for what we have now and never ask for more." She turned back to the roasting fowl. "We pay our poll tax every year on time. Then we are invisible and silent," she looked over her shoulder to her daughter, "and alive," she said softly, then turned back.

"Mother," Moses, Marnina's younger brother, called from the doorway, "it's almost sundown. We must leave soon."

"Yes, yes, just a minute while I do this," Miriam had lifted the fowl off the spit and set it inside an earthen-ware pot, then placed a lid on it. She gathered her skirts in her hands and took hold of the edges of the pot and pushed it back and to the side of the fire. She then banked the flame, straightened and wiped her hands on her apron. "There," she said, "almost ready. Marni? Are you ready?"

"Yes, Mama." She had gone to stand and wait beside Moses, still thinking about the house which was considered large in the Jewish community, but very small by any other standard. Marnina felt they should have better since her father was a favored merchant of the court.

It was then that the rabbi came through the door. He gently pushed between Moses and Marnina and walked directly to Miriam. He took both her hands in his and mumbled a short Hebrew prayer for the dead. Finally, he looked into her eyes, "I am so sorry," he said. "I have just received word that bandits raided the supply train of which Judah and Abraham were a part. There were no survivors." He gently led the woman to a nearby stool. She sat down heavily, stunned, her eyes focusing on nothing.

"Are you sure, Rabbi?" Marnina had moved and taken the man's arm, pulling him around to face her. "Are they sure?" she asked again. It was then that she heard the ripping of cloth and looked to see that her mother had torn her gown. She turned and watched as her mother ripped the edge of his shirt, both signifying that her father and brother were dead.

"Is no one going to claim the bodies?" Marnina cried out. "Will no soldiers be sent for rescue, to see if anyone was left alive? My father and brother were men, just like any other men!" she shouted, tears trickling down her face.

"No, my child," the rabbi claimed her hands which trembled in indignation, "they were not like other men. They were Jews."

Toronto, 1994

"By the year 953 most of my family were dead. My father and brother had been killed by bandits while traveling from France. My uncle, drowned when the ship in which he was sailing was lost in a storm—it was the risk they all took by being Radhanite merchants."

"What were so special about . . . Radhanites?" Jon asked.

"The Radhanites," Marnina lectured, in a bored tone, "were actually a firm of trader merchants, mostly Jews, who had opened trade routes throughout northern Europe, along the Mediterranean and as far away as China. Most agents only travelled part of the route, trading with colleagues who accumulated merchandise on an adjacent leg. Occasionally, like the last time my father and brother left, they went further along the known route, searching for something unusual."

She had fallen silent for a few moments, then continued in a hushed voice. "But they didn't come back this time. And no one cared. After all, they were only Jews. I was angry." Marnina's body had tensed during the recital. "So angry," she whispered. She could still feel the impotent fury over the injustice of

it all.

"What did you do?" Jon asked softly.

"Nothing," Marnina finally replied. "Not then, anyway."

She pulled away from Jon, lay flat on her back and stared at the ceiling. Jon sat up, propped the pillows behind him and leaned back against the headboard of the bed. He looked down at her tenderly, pushing the hair off her forehead. "What happened?" he finally asked.

"Toward the end of the year," she began in monotone voice, "the sickness came to Córdoba. And, of course, we Jews were ultimately to blame even though everyone was getting sick, be they Jew, Christian or Muslim. First my mother died, then a week or so later my brother came down with the fever."

Marnina stared at the ceiling, forcing herself back to a time in her life so filled with pain it was difficult to face.

"I had encountered Cemal in odd moments over the years and learned what he was . . . a vampire. He didn't frighten me and we became very . . . good friends. He was always there when I needed him most." Marnina wished she could weep for her lost friend and she sucked in a breath remembering the pain of separation.

After a few moments she continued. "It was evening and Moses was dead. He was in the hands of the rabbi and God and I was ill myself. You must understand, I was sick and angry, especially with God. I had slipped out onto the roof for a breath of air. It had begun to hurt to breath and there was no one left to care for me." Marnina had pushed back the feather comforter as if her body, along with her mind, was remembering the burning fever . . .

Córdoba, 953

She sucked in the cool night air as if it would bank the fires raging with in her. She slumped down on the flat roof and lay her face on its cool surface. Her hair was damp and her loose clothing clung to her sweating body. She was dying and she wept at the unfairness of it all.

He picked her up and cradled her in his arms. "Oh my sweet one," he crooned in flowing Arabic.

She tried to struggle in his arms but his embrace was wonderfully cool and soothing. "I don't want to die," she whispered. "Please," she looked up at him and pleaded, "please, don't let me die."

"You will be as I am," he responded sadly, "a creature of the night. You will feed on human terror, on human blood and you will be shunned."

"I am shunned now," she whispered in return, "what difference would it be?"

"Mortals will truly fear you," he said softly as he wiped the sweat from her brow. He could hear the erratic beating of her heart and knew her time was ending.

"I am a Jew," she rasped, "could it be any worse than my life now?"

"Oh yes," he answered quickly, "it is much, much worse."

"Cemal," her vision was blurring, and every breath she drew was a knife wound. "I want to be with you," She coughed and the pain in her chest intensified. "Forever."

He held her close, and resigned her to her fate. "So be it."

Cemal's eyes glowed brightly and the fangs hidden in his upper jaw slid into place as he leaned forward; he savagely pierced the jugular vein in her neck and drank deeply. He drank until her heart fluttered and almost stopped, only then did he pull back, bare his arm, and sunk his teeth into his own vein drawing forth his own blood.

"Drink," he commanded, as he pushed his wrist to Marnina's mouth. "To be as I am you must drink."

He silently willed her to swallow, then swallow again as she prepared to cross the boundary into immortality. In time, her heart stopped completely.

Weak as he was, he picked her up and took her to his resting place

Toronto, 1994

"In time, I woke to the world of darkness," she said, a shudder running through her body.

"Was it so terrible?" Jon asked. He could only wonder what his own time of awakening would be like.

"The hunger," she replied. She stared at the ceiling remembering. "The hunger was all I could think about. I could not focus on anything, not even the fact that I still lived, only the hunger. Cemal brought me my first victims, until I learned to kill for myself."

She felt Jon tensing beside her and understood. Slowly she eased the tension in her own body then sat up to face him. "It will not be like that for you, my love," she assured him, reaching for his hands and covering them with her own. "Oh, the hunger will be the same. But I follow a different path now and have for nearly five centuries. I will teach you the way of the light, the way of love. This, I promise you."

Jon looked deeply into her brown-black eyes and believed. He believed her instantly, as he had the first time she made the promise. "I will miss being your lover," he whispered.

"I will *always* love you," she replied. "And we will find a way to be together."

Chapter Nine

Nick was cornered in a nightmarish dream-world that switched from one scene to another with sickening intensity. In his hand was a small wicker doll which had folded in on itself, and wherever he turned, the woman was facing him. Her slender frame was covered in a sheer fabric, whose color changed with every movement, first lilac then periwinkle, then violet, then every shade in-between. A black cloak rested on her shoulders.

"Dream the last dream, Detective Knight," she crooned softly. "Share what you've been given with no one. And dream the last dream."

"No," he answered, "no, no, No"

"NO!" Nick shouted as he tried to sit up in bed. He shook with fear, uncontrollable terror, and it took him several moments to untangle himself from the satin sheets.

Once free, the clamminess of the silk pajamas clinging to his blood-sweating body was overpowering. He rose and peeled them off on his way to the shower, tossing them into the small garbage can. They would never come clean, and the bloodstains would be a constant reminder of the nightmare.

Standing under the hot running water, washing the stink of terror off his body, Nick thoughts centered on the nightmare. Who was the woman, and what was the significance of the doll? The more he tried to remember, the more elusive they became.

He got out of the shower, wrapped the towel around his waist and began to shave. The woman from the dream stared back at him from the mirror.

"Dream the last dream," she kept saying.

"But . . . I'll die."

This was crazy!

Nick wiped his face and threw the towel into the corner on his way back to the bedroom. He dressed quickly in a pair of sweats. Barefoot, he padded downstairs and went directly to the refrigerator, removed a bottle of blood and poured himself a large tumbler full. Standing at the counter, his hands shaking, he drank most of the glass in one gulp, then slammed it back down on the counter top. It shattered on impact.

"Stop," he murmured, then took a breath. He quickly swept up the broken glass trying to regain control. Grabbing a clean goblet from the cupboard and filling it with the remainder from the bottle, he glanced around.

It was time to clean. He decided to start at the top and work his way down.

Nick padded back up the stairs, refilled glass in hand, and stared at the mess of the bedroom. Setting the glass on the dresser, he grabbed the end corners of the sheets and pulled. The sound of tearing cloth was like the roar of the ocean on a deserted beach.

"Damn it!" Nick swore as he balled the sheets together and threw them out the bedroom doorway. He yanked the dresser drawer open and its contents spilled onto the floor. He stood staring at the clean bed linen piled around him, the empty drawer hanging at his side.

"Stop," he muttered, "calm, be calm." He took a deep breath, squatted and placed the linens back in the drawer and put the drawer back on its track. Taking clean sheets from the open drawer, he tossed the set on top of the mattress, then gently pushed the drawer closed.

It was as he was moving the night stand away from the bed that he noticed the sparkle on the floor. He bent down around the stand and grabbed for the object.

It was a watch.

A woman's watch.

It was Natalie's watch. How in the hell had Natalie's watch ended up jammed between his bed and night stand? He slowly rose to his feet and closed his eyes—

Lying on top of her, Nick smiled. He closed her eyes with feather light kisses.

"I want you," Natalie responded, her arms tightening around his neck, "Oh God, how I want you."

He shook his head, breaking the spell.

Unconsciously, he had been fingering the broken band of her watch. He'd have it fixed before giving it back. And while he was at Saul's, his friendly jeweler—that was open on Sunday—he'd see what else he could find that might assuage his conscience. The limits of credibility had really been strained this time. Natalie should not be putting her job, her career, her integrity on the line for him.

He leaned on the railing overlooking the first floor of the loft. Perhaps it was time to move on, to start again someplace else. It was inevitable—at some point he would have to leave. Why not now?

The sharp edges of the watch bit into his palm as his hand tightened.

Just about the same time Nick started his cleaning, Natalie was walking through the lobby of Toronto University Hospital en route to Dr. Charlie Frank's office. Rushing across the lobby she looked to her watch to check the time—her wrist was still bare as she still hadn't found it.

She felt a little silly for not canceling her emergency appointment because today she felt fine. Why then, she thought, as she entered the elevator and punched the button to the third floor, was she here?

Because, she chided herself, for the past few weeks you've been sick and it's time to take care of it. She was not one of those 'doctor, heal thyself' physicians, and even if she were, she was a pathologist not an internist.

"Nat," Charlie called from his office as she entered, "how the hell are you?"

"Charlie," Natalie replied, walking through the empty waiting room and into his office, "where is everybody?"

Charlie Frank was Natalie's age, thirty-one, and looked forty-one. He was short, slightly overweight, balding and exceedingly cheerful. He and Natalie had become close friends during medical school and had kept in touch over the years.

"It's Saturday, Nat, most office staff have the day off and I'm *supposed* to be doing paper work, remember? Research—publish or perish, you know the routine," he said as he looked up from the computer

terminal placed conveniently at the left edge of his old oak desk.

"What's the new project?" Natalie asked, seating herself in one of the chairs in front of his desk. Charlie always had some new task in mind; he was never content to stand in one spot for very long.

"Thinking about hooking up with the research team at McMaster; they're going to do a cooperative study with The University of Rochester, monoclonal antibodies and liver cancer. Clinical pathologist by the name of Sparks, Salazar in radiation oncology, Bennett in medical oncology, etc., etc. You know the names." Charlie leaned forward with his hands folded on top of his desk and looked directly at Natalie. "But you didn't come here to talk about my latest research project did you? What's wrong?"

Nat smiled—Charlie was also never one for small talk, he liked to cut to the chase quickly and get on with the solving of the problem, whatever the problem appeared to be. In few terse sentences, Natalie listed her symptoms: the nausea, vomiting, dizzy spells and blackouts, and also added what she thought might be wrong.

"I think it's probably overwork combined with some new strain of flu that's going around," she said, leaning back into the chair.

Charlie had been listening intently, making notes in an illegible handwriting. "When did this start?"

"Oh," Natalie thought for a moment, "probably around three weeks ago. Yeah, that's about right."

"Have you changed your diet any?" he asked

"Not that I can think of."

"Any new chemicals you may be working with downtown?"

"No," Natalie replied with a shake of her head.

"When's the last time you menstruated?"

"Charlie!" she exclaimed tersely. When she saw the frown on his face, she sighed. "I was right on schedule last month. Every twenty-one days and I'm due any day now."

When she'd finished, Charlie tried to hide his smile. "Okay, just checking. Let's get some blood work done and then do an examination."

"Sounds good to me," Natalie agreed. She had draped her coat over the back of the chair and rose to follow him into an examining room, rolling up her sleeve as she walked.

About an hour later she waited, alone, in Charlie's office. He'd gone down to the lab for the results of her blood work and told her he'd only be a few minutes. Natalie stood at the window, staring at the piles of snow.

They lay together, passion rising, exploring each other with their fingers and lips, each touch was as bright as that of a burning match and as intense. "You are so beautiful," Nick whispered. He trailed feather kisses from her shoulder to her elbow to the inside of her palm.

"Nick," Natalie moaned. Her hand sliding to the back of his neck, she gently pulled his head upward to her.

Natalie jumped as the door to the outer office slammed. Any time she had a moment for reflection, the dreamscapes took over; they were occurring with increasing frequency, very vivid and extraordinarily real. Her heart was pounding and there was sweat on her brow. "Charlie?" she called, her voice shaking.

"Yep, it's me," he said, strolling back into his office. He tossed the patient's record on the desk, then looked at her closely. "You okay?"

"You tell me?" Natalie's smile was tentative; there was a slight blush to her cheeks. She felt as if

Charlie could read her mind and had seen her very private fantasy. "Well?"

"Ah, Nat," he motioned toward the chair, "I think you'd better sit down."

Natalie's face paled as she walked around the desk and returned to her chair. "What?" she asked softly. She trembled, the phrase 'terminal' immediately coming to mind.

"You're not dying, if that's what you think," Charlie said, smiling brightly. "Your white blood cell count's a little high but I don't think it's anything serious at this point. You should be fine by the second trimester, probably before."

"What—?" Natalie choked. "What did you say?"

"I had my suspicions," Charlie chuckled, "so I had the lab run a STAT beta hcg test. You know, a pregnancy test?"

Natalie stared back. "I *know* what a beta hcg test is," she began, her voice rising steadily. "What I'm telling you is that the lab made a mistake."

"No," he smiled, "no mistake."

"Yes," Natalie responded forcefully, "there must have been!"

"I can assure you that the lab did *not* make a mistake." The smile disappeared.

Natalie leaned forward and pounded her flat palm on his desk. "It's impossible."

"Natalie, calm down," Charlie said—his light humor having completely disappeared. "Look, I carried the sample down there myself and watched over them while they labeled it. You know the accuracy of this test now—no false negatives and no false positives. You, my dear, are pregnant."

"I am *not*, do you hear me, *not* pregnant!"

"Yes, you are."

"No, Charlie," Natalie shook her head back and forth, "you don't understand. Unless you believe in a second immaculate conception, my being pregnant is IM-possible!"

"Look, Nat," Charlie said sternly, "I don't know what's going on in your personal life—"

She didn't let him finish. "I haven't had sexual intercourse with *anyone* in . . . a long time. And I didn't go through IVF, if that's what you're thinking."

She bent her head and put her hands over her face as if she could shut out not only the light but also the confusion of her mind as well. "No," she whispered, more to herself than to anyone else, "can't possibly be." The dreams and sexual fantasies she'd been having lately about Nick were there the second she closed her eyes.

"Nick," she moaned, as he gently entered her waiting body. She arched to join him and begin their frantic drive to meet and float over the abyss.

"Natalie," he gasped, "I've wanted you for so long."

She could actually *feel* him touching her, caressing her, entering her body. Pulling her trembling hands away from her face and forcing them down to her lap, she looked up at Charlie and cleared her throat. "Could," she stopped, cleared her throat again, then started again, "couldn't it be . . . psychosomatic? You know, when you want something so badly, your mind tells your body it's so?"

Charlie looked at her intently for a few moments, considering everything she'd said. "Well, if it was just the physical signs I might agree. Your breasts are beginning to be tender, you're vomiting in the morning and have dizzy spells and near blackouts—those the mind can control sometimes, as well as the hormones. But look at the result of your pregnancy test, Nat." He shoved the test result toward her

across the desk. "If that were the case those results would be borderline and they're not. You're pregnant whether you want to believe it or not."

Natalie picked up the test results, read them, then slumped back in her chair and bleakly stared at a point on the wall just to the right of Charlie's head.

"Natalie?" Charlie had waited a few moments to let her digest what he'd said. "Do you think your, ah, encounter was so painful that you're blocking it?" He shuffled some papers on his desk. When she didn't respond, he asked bluntly, but very gently, "Were you raped? Is that it?"

Jolted back to the present, Natalie silently contemplated the possibility. "No, I don't think so," she answered, her voice, tentative at first, then more firmly. "No. I can assure you I wasn't raped."

"What about that bruise on your arm?" he asked warily, appearing to point out a possibility that might be painful. "It's pretty faint, but it's still there, and it looks to me like someone's finger marks."

"Oh, that," Natalie absent-mindedly rubbed her left forearm, "sometimes Nick doesn't know his own strength." She looked to Charlie, the corners of her mouth turning up slightly at his raised eyebrows. "No, it's not what you think. Nick's a Metro homicide detective. He's someone I, ah, work closely with sometimes. We're friends . . . just friends."

Natalie rose from the chair, grabbed her coat and purse. "I've gotta go," her voice betrayed the confident words spoken before, it now held a quality of wonder and perhaps amazement as well. "Charlie, how far along do you think I am?"

"Probably less than a month, maybe a little more." Charlie had also risen and was following her to the door. "Natalie, are you going to be all right?" he asked, taking gentle hold of her arm, preventing her from leaving at that moment.

"Yeah," she said, a dazed expression on her face, "I'll be fine. Just gotta think about it."

Charlie sighed. "Make an appointment with your gynecologist on Monday, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Promise?"

Natalie touched his face and smiled into his big, sorrowful brown eyes, "You're sweet, you know. Yes, I promise."

"Good. Now go home, take a nap and drink a big glass of milk. No caffeine, watch your weight and you'll be fine in about eight months from now," he answered.

"Okay," Natalie answered, and walked blindly to the elevator. The doors opened and she entered, pushed the down button, then leaned back on the wall. Absent-mindedly, she placed her hand on her abdomen, as her mind began to explore the possibility of a new life growing within her body.

"Sure," she said as the doors closed, "sure."

Chapter Ten

The afternoon was as crystal clear and crisply cold as only a Canadian winter afternoon could be. Jon and Marnina aimlessly strolled through Balfour Park, holding hands. She knew they made an attractive couple. She was tiny, only about five feet in height, quite slender with long, thick chestnut brown hair. Just topping six feet he towered over her. His hair was a golden brown and his eyes were as blue as the Caribbean; his mouth was hard and straight when he was somber or just thinking, but his bottom lip was crooked when he laughed and his eyes sparkled like a diamond in the sun. They were both hatless and had donned very expensive sable ski jackets to protect them from the cold.

They stopped to watch the children play in the snow. "Ah," Marnina sighed, "to be that innocent again." A sad smile creased her face. She felt Jon shiver with the cold. "Do you want to go back?" she asked.

"Not yet," he responded. He wrapped his fur jacket closer to his body, then took her hand in his and jammed them together into his pocket. "That's better," he sighed, then added with a pause, "How long did you stay in Córdoba?"

They had dropped the subject of her background with the rising of the sun, and proceeded with the daily tasks of the living. Breakfast, cleaning up, phone calls and the demands of the business world. In the afternoon they had decided to escape the stuffiness of the house for the clean fresh air of a winter afternoon.

"We stayed in the area until the Berbers started attacking, then moved north to the area around Toledo. I was saddened when I heard that they'd finally destroyed the city in 1013. It meant that nothing I had grown up with was left." Marnina had pulled her hand free and wrapped her arms around her front as if for extra warmth. The winter air had nothing to do with her being chilled, she didn't feel the cold as Jon did. That came from within.

"The followers of Christ were on the march," she continued, "they finally succeeded in taking back the city in 1085. It wasn't long before they started their mass conversion of the Jews." Marnina's mind was wandering back as she looked around her and saw the alien landscape. "So different from Spain, you know?"

"Hmm. What did you do then?" Jon asked.

Marnina's soft laugh was without humor, and the accompanying smile cold. "I fed on Christians," she replied. "So many times Cemal had to clean up after me, I was so careless. I didn't care, you see. He cared but I didn't. Not yet anyway. After a while we were forced to move again and went north toward Madrid. We stayed in that area until the fourteen hundreds. We survived, and I learned to be more careful."

"Come on." Jon took Marnina's arm. "Let's go home. I'm cold and hungry and maybe the fax from Etienne in Paris has arrived."

"How much are we transferring?" Marnina asked as she let herself be led back toward the main gate and their house on Roxborough Street.

"Three million in gold bullion is being shipped to the bank in Zurich. It's being held in trust for the banks in Germany, until the economy becomes more stable," he answered.

"I think we should contact George in London. I don't think all of it should be shipped at once."

"Perhaps. Etienne's men are very good though." Jon was thoughtful and his face reflected capitulation.

"But you're the boss and you're probably right."

"There are always new terrorist groups emerging from the Middle East, they'd just love to get their hands on that bullion. And," she added, gently squeezing his arm, "we can never be too careful."

"And you, my dear," Jon responded, smiling down at her gently, "are nothing but careful."

"I learned that lesson, my love," she said, "the hard way."

Chapter Eleven

Nick spent the rest of Saturday afternoon cleaning the loft and it was spotless when he left for his shift. He returned just before dawn, tired and frustrated—everything he'd tried to accomplish was foiled by his inability to concentrate and the fact that it was the weekend. Schanke had the day off, and Nick, in his present state of mind was thankful for the opportunity to be alone. Still, he had missed Schanke's constant banter and babble even though he was loath to admit it.

He smiled as he opened the refrigerator and took out one of the bottles of blood, then walked to the window to catch a few glimpses of the coming dawn before the light started to burn. What would it be like, he wondered, to walk in the light again?

Nick downed the contents of the bottle, picked up the remote and closed the shutters, then lay down on the couch and fell into a sound sleep. The ringing of the phone woke him in the middle of the afternoon. His answering machine kicked in before he was able to grab the receiver.

"Yeah, Knight here," it said, before Nick was able to shout into the receiver, "Hold on." He leaned over the back of the couch, turned the machine off, then spoke again. It was clear from his voice that he was still half-asleep.

"Yo, Nick," it was Schanke, "sorry if I disturbed your beauty sleep."

"It's all right," Nick said, "I should be up anyway. What have you got?"

"I made some calls this morning and found the couple who were in the room next to our murder victim."

"Anything?"

"Uh-huh. Seems they were coming back from a verrry late dinner—they'd been, ah, busy, ya know, newlyweds—couldn't afford the honeymoon suite. Anyway, they observed a man leaving the room next door and assumed it was the occupant of the room; didn't think to much about it but did wonder where he could possibly be going at that hour."

"What time was it?"

"About twelve-thirty/quarter to one. They knew that most of the bars in town were closed by that hour, and they'd just closed up the remaining restaurant in the hotel. But, they had other things on their mind—getting back to bed early or late or not at all—just sloughed it off. They checked out on Tuesday morning and went back to Manotick and didn't think anything about it. They were gone and the room was empty by the time the victim was discovered."

"Any description?" Nick asked.

"Vague," Schanke responded. "About six foot, thin, wore a black trench coat and black fedora hat. I'm gonna drive up there Monday with mug shots and the drawing of our lady friend. I doubt it'll do any good, they didn't see the guy's face. But, it never hurts to try and who knows what they may remember by the time I get up there."

"Yea, right. So, it looks like Ms. Maxwell was not the last person to see Calluori alive." Nick rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"That's what it looks like, pal. You going to see Green tomorrow?"

"Hmm. I'm gonna call first thing Monday morning for an appointment."

"Be careful," Schanke warned. "Any wrong move and the Captain will be all over you like ants on cotton candy."

"That's a pretty gross image." Nick chuckled.

"Yea, well that's what's gonna happen if you screw up, pal," Schanke admonished, "and I really don't want to go through the hassle of breaking in a new partner. You almost blew it and got assigned permanent traffic duty on the Fiori investigation—that was close and I don't want to get that close again."

"I hear what you're sayin', Schank, and I promise to be *very* careful," Nick placated. "Call me when you get back from Manotick—where the hell is Manotick anyway?"

"Beats the hell out of me, I'm a transplant too, remember? Gotta find a map around here someplace. I think it's somewhere near Ottawa," Schanke mumbled.

"Keep in touch," Nick said.

"Yea, okay," Schanke replied before hanging up.

Nick replaced the receiver, then lay back down on the couch and tried to get back to sleep. After a few minutes he rose and went to the refrigerator, dumping the empty bottle in the trash along the way. With another full bottle in hand, he went back to the phone and called Saul—his friendly jeweler—who was always interested in making a house call to the loft as it meant something special, something interesting, and something very expensive.

Chapter Twelve

Marnina had spent most of the past night and early morning in the downstairs study of the ten-room Tudor-styled house she shared with Jon. The study was a large airy room, one wall of which was a huge bay window that let in the bright winter sunshine, the other three lined with mahogany-stained oak bookshelves. It was a sparsely furnished room with only a large Victorian desk, plush leather couch and several matching chairs. She had been poring over financial statements from her various banks around the world. National Bank of Canada was her North American property, but she had properties in Europe, Asia and Australia as well. In fact, it was during the merger with the Australian bank that she had met Jon. She'd always looked on that merger with fondness, as it had brought her the true love that she had sought for centuries.

Having slept late, Jon was reading the morning paper from cover to cover, as was his habit. She heard the papers falling to the floor and felt his gaze on her; she looked to him and smiled. "What?" They had been together so long that she knew from the expression on his face that he needed information.

"What happened in Toledo?"

Jon had been so very quiet this morning, and distant in a way that worried her. So, he wanted her to complete her story. Yes, perhaps it was time. It was time to describe the different paths he could chose when he woke from his sleep of death. And, to prove to him that the path she had ultimately chosen for herself was one not based in fear but in love.

"Nothing," Marnina answered after a few moments. She rose from her seat behind the desk and walked over to the couch and curled up at one end. "We stayed there for a while before moving on to Madrid where we didn't stay long at all. Madrid was a beautiful city," she mused, "even then. But it just didn't suit us—Cemal and I—and we left and moved on to Segovia, then Burgos and, after a while we bought a small estate in Pamplona where we stayed for many years."

Marnina's voice had drifted to a whisper as her mind went back in time, recalling every event in detail for the first time in many, many years. In describing her beginnings to Jon, she hoped to prepare him for his own death and reawakening. She'd always thought that time was long in the future, but lately she wasn't so sure.

"Where is . . . Pamplona?" Jon asked, as he shuffled the morning papers together in a neat pile.

"North—north of Madrid. We always seemed to go north." Marnina's voice had a far-away quality to it, as she stared off into space and remembered times long ago. "We stayed there a long time," she added.

Jon watched her closely and noted the pain flashing in her eyes. Whatever she was remembering must hurt. "What happened?" he asked softly.

"Cemal died the true death. He left me, alone. It—it was my doing . . ."

Cemal had pulled Marnina into the dark, master bedroom that they shared in daylight hours. There were elaborately woven wool tapestries over the windows, originally hung to keep out the draft, but which also served to keep out the light. The room was dominated by a large, four-poster bed set quite high off the floor. "Marnina, we cannot shelter so many mortals. This castle is not large and someone from the area may take notice. The priests will hear of it and *they* will come," he admonished.

"Where will they go, if not here? How will they survive if no one helps them?" Marnina pleaded.

"I don't care!" Cemal exclaimed. He took hold of her shoulders and gave her a little shake, deeply concerned. "Some of these people have been here a year or more. Most of our servants are loyal to us but I see the fear in them. These Jews of yours must go."

"How can you say that? How can I turn them away? They are *my* people." Marnina whispered fiercely, pulling out of his grasp. She paced the room, spitting out sentence after sentence, trying to get him to accept and agree. "Ferdinand and Isabella have expelled all Jews from Spain, France truly does not want them nor does Germany. Where are they to go—this is their land too!"

"Marnina," Cemal caught her and held her close. "Don't you see? They are *not* your people any longer. I and our kind are your people, and we need your loyalty now."

"No," Marnina shook her head back and forth slowly, "you don't understand. While I may exist in the dark, I will always be a Jew, no matter what happens." She pulled away from him. "Now, I must talk to Cook and see about provisions," she said, walking swiftly from the room. She could feel Cemal staring at her departing figure, and knew a worried frown crossed his face....

Marnina stared at Jon without seeing him. There was so much pain in her eyes that Jon's eyes teared and he asked in a husky voice, "What then?"

Marnina started. She rose and walked to the window and it was a few moments before she had enough control of herself to continue. "It was as Cemal said," she began, "several of our servants were too afraid of the Inquisitors and one must have said something. Just before sundown they came. It was Cemal who faced them. He had me hidden in the crypt below the floor of the chapel. They . . . destroyed him," she whispered.

"What did you do?"

"I ripped their throats out," Marina replied flatly. "Of course," she continued after a few moments, "that was many nights later and they had taken over our house. *Our* house!" she explained. "They had . . . it doesn't make any difference. I left after that and wandered a bit. I didn't care what happened to me."

Marnina stopped speaking. She'd again seated herself by the window, as if to draw strength from the mid-day sun, her arms wrapped around her knees, almost shutting herself off from the world. Resting her head on her knees, she stared out the window for many long minutes. She sighed, then unfolded herself and went back to the couch.

"Eventually I entered the Pyrenees mountain area of Navarre. One night, just before dawn, I was cornered by bandits who decided that I was just what they needed to stave off their lust. They would not be thwarted and there were too many to resist. I was weak, I hadn't fed for many nights—I didn't care. Only the true death would have been my escape and truly, I welcomed it. Then—Janette and LaCroix happened upon the scene. They, well . . ."

"Were these the ones who walked in the light?"

Marnina looked to him, a bemused expression on her face. "Oh no," she said quickly, "they most definitely follow the path of darkness."

"Were you hurt?" Jon tried to imagine the terror of the situation and failed.

"No, not really," Marnina said, but her tone held resignation and some self-pity as well. "We stayed together for awhile, until they tired of my company. One night I awoke and they were gone. I've considered myself indebted to them ever since. That debt is now paid."

"When—" Jon began then stopped. He took her and held her tightly in his arms, smiling down at

her with as much love and understanding as he could muster. "When did you change your . . . path?"

"I wandered alone for a few years more," Marnina snuggled in Jon's embrace, "before I met Alec. I was very weak—I had begun to feed only on animals. He found me lying in a field, waiting for the sun to rise."

Jon held her and stroked her arm. "To think," he murmured, "I would have never met you."

"Hmm. It took him many nights to convince me that I should return with him to his mistress in Rome. In the end," she sighed, "he succeeded only because I had nowhere else to go, and did not care what happened to me."

She pulled out of Jon's embrace and began to pace nervously around the room. It was a few moments before she returned and continued. "So, I went to Rome. I stayed with my benefactress for many years, then was sent to Milan to be properly taught by my dear friend. He is the one who taught me to walk in the light, to exist in the mortal world. From him I learned that for our kind, love must suffice—that it must be genuine or we are nothing."

"Do these people still . . . live?" Jon questioned, holding her close. He wanted to find them and thank them for bringing Marnina back from the edge of destruction.

"My benefactress in Rome died the true death in 1658, but my beloved friend still lives. I still hear from him from time to time. He is our agent in Senza Pari." Marnina closed her eyes and smiled. She could imagine the look of astonishment on Jon's face.

Chapter Thirteen

Nick woke early Sunday afternoon, went through his usual routine—bottled bovine, shower and shave, dressed in jeans and a silk T-shirt, then sat down to wait for Saul to show up. He picked up the phone and punched the numbers for Schanke's home. Jenny answered. "Hi," Nick said, a smile covering his face, "how's my favorite girl today?" "Good," she replied, then screamed out without covering the mouthpiece, "Daddy, Nick's on the phone for you!"

Nick's ear was ringing even though he'd been quick to hold the receiver at arm's length.

"Guess what?" Jenny had lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You're never gonna believe it in a zillion years."

"You're probably right, so why don't you go ahead and tell me now?"

"Kenny's dog is gonna have puppies soon and I asked Mom and she said it was okay if it was okay with Daddy and he said he'd think about it and I thought maybe you could kinda talk to him for me cause we're pals, right?" Jenny completed her speech without even taking a breath.

Nick acted confused. "Jen," he said patiently. "Let me get this straight. Kenny's dog is going to have puppies, right?"

"Yeah."

"And you talked to your Mom and she said it was okay with her if it was okay with your Dad. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Jenny," Nick stalled, dragging out the suspense, "what's okay with your Mom?"

"Oh, Nick, sometimes I think you are *so* dense!" Jenny added some very grown up exasperation to her voice, and she sighed dramatically, "If I can have one of the puppies, of course."

"Of course." Nick smiled. "Now what, exactly, is my part in all this?"

"You just gotta talk Daddy into thinking it's a great idea," she explained simply.

"Oh," Nick said, "is that all? And, I suppose you want me to make him think that it was all his idea in the first place, huh?"

"Gee," this was something she hadn't thought of, "think you could do that? Uh-oh, here comes Daddy. See what you can do, please?"

"I'll see."

"Okay," Schanke's suspicion was obvious, "what's she talked you into this time?"

"Nothing," Nick looked down at his bare feet, wiggling his toes on the chilly concrete floor, "honest."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Schanke's voice held a note of disbelief. He was sure his daughter had his partner exactly where she had her father—twisted right around her little finger.

"Schank," Nick asked, changing the subject, "I know you stopped by the station this morning. Anything come back from Interpol or the FBI on the markings on our victim's arms?"

"Yeah. Came in just as I was leaving. Nothing, nada, zilch. They have no similarities on file and, at present, all known terrorist groups are behaving themselves. Which is pretty fu—," Schanke caught himself just in time, "ah, amazing, when you think about it."

"Yeah, well," Nick added thoughtfully, "it was worth a shot."

Just then the buzzer announced the presence of someone wanting entrance to the loft. Nick walked

to the monitor and pressed the release button when he saw Saul's familiar face.

"Look, Schank, gotta go. You're driving over to Manotick tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, drive carefully and call me when you get back."

"Will do," Schanke said, then added, "and, Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't even try it. I don't want any dog in this house peeing all over my carpet, eating my slippers and chewing my furniture," he said with conviction.

"Gotta go," Nick replied hurriedly as he opened the elevator door. "We'll talk about it later." Nick pressed the disconnect button before Schanke could reply.

Saul Rabinowicz stood just inside the doorway. He was a little, old jeweler whose aging process had probably gone into overdrive when he hit thirty.

"So? You're still here, still alone?" Saul said, handing his hat to Nick. He looked somewhere between the age of sixty and one hundred and sixty. It was hard to tell.

"Hi, Saul." Nick found him intelligent and quick-witted, but brave to the point of stupidity and stubborn as the day is long. "Yeah, still here," he said, laying the hat on the counter and picking up Natalie's watch.

"I don't know, Nicholas," Saul shook his head from side to side. "A fine man like you, a fine police officer—a detective already—and still not married? Now, if you should want to come to dinner on Saturday—" he began. He'd been trying to marry Nick off to anyone of his various single female relatives since Nick had saved him from the hands of muggers over two years ago.

"Ah, Saul," Nick cut him off, gently changing the subject, "this is the easy one." He'd picked up Natalie's watch from the counter and handed it to him. "Can you put a new band on this, same size, but use a higher grain leather?"

Saul looked the watch over. "Sure, not a problem," he responded. "You want it cleaned too?" He checked his own watch for the time, then added, "It's running a little slow; why don't I clean it and put in a new battery as well?"

"Great. When can you have it ready?"

"Tomorrow afternoon too late? You want I should send Kenny over with it when it's ready?"

"No," Nick said as he walked over to his drafting table. "I'll be in your area around six and I'll pick it up then." He reached for a sketch that he had done earlier and handed it to Saul. "How long will it take you to make something like this?"

The sketch was of a Caduceus, the Greek symbol for the medical profession. "I'd like it done to scale, of course," he explained, "in eighteen carat gold. I thought maybe the winged staff could be antiques and the coiled serpents in Black Hills, make a nice contrast, different."

"Nicholas," Saul murmured, "such a pleasure to do this kind of fine work again." He looked up from the sketch, "It's not going to be cheap," he warned, "what with the price of gold these days. And Black Hills may not be available. How about I should use the tricolor instead?"

"That would work, and don't worry about the price," Nick commented. "How soon can you have it ready?"

"A week?" Saul asked. "And that's probably pushing it some."

"Do the best you can. And I'll want an twenty-four inch gold chain as well. You pick out one that complements the pendant."

"Okay," Saul agreed as he edged toward to door. "A special present for," his eyebrows rose in

question as he looked to Nick, "a special lady?" He carefully folded the sketch and put it together with the watch in his coat pocket.

"She is that," Nick answered, handing Saul back his hat. "A very . . . special lady."

Natalie's day started earlier than usual. She was up, out of the house and on her way to the office by ten. She'd called her boss, Jim Moorefield, earlier and asked for a couple of minutes of his time.

She now sat looking around his office waiting for him to return. It suddenly occurred to her that the prize office space for the Chief Corner was actually pretty small, or maybe it just seemed that way because he had papers and medical journals everywhere. In fact, she'd had to move the latest editions off the chair to sit down. Not knowing where to put them, she let them rest comfortably on her lap.

"Natalie," Jim Moorefield entered carrying a mug of coffee and navigated the precarious path to the chair behind his desk. "Sorry to hold you up," he said, as he sat down and took a sip of coffee at the same time. "God, that's hot. Now," he pushed the chair closer to the desk, made space for his mug, then looked to Natalie, "if you're here about a raise, we can't do anything until the new budget's approved in June."

"No, Jim," the corners of Natalie's mouth turn up in a slight smile, "I'm not here about a raise. I—" she hesitated, looked down and fiddled with the journals on her lap. "I need some time off," she finally asked. "I'm—" she hesitated again, then took a deep breath and looked at Jim directly, "I'm having some personal problems, and I just need some peace and quiet to work things out."

"How long?"

"A week?" Natalie asked, knowing full well that it was unlikely to be granted on such short notice.

Jim shook his head. "Natalie, your timing is lousy, you know? We're short-handed as it is and, did you forget that we've got a first-year resident starting his rotation on Friday? You know how much baby-sitting they need."

"I'd forgotten about that," Nat said in a small voice.

"And, Ken is off on Thursday for the pathology conference in Chicago. I've already asked Alan Snyderman, over at McMaster, if he could help us out." Moorefield took in Natalie's look of dejection and her obvious pallor. "Are you all right? Is something medically wrong?" he asked.

"No, no," she responded quickly, "nothing like that. It's something personal. You know," she was reaching for something tangible and truthful to reinforce her request, "family."

Moorefield sat back in his chair, steeped the tips of his fingers and studied Natalie for a few moments. "Tell you what I'll do," he finally compromised, "three days."

"Okay," Natalie breathed a sigh of relief.

"You be back by Wednesday," he said, "and I'll cover for you."

"Thanks, Jim, I really appreciate this," Natalie rose and picked up her coat.

"Yeah, well," he said smiling, "you're a damn good pathologist, Dr. Lambert, and I don't want to lose you. But I can tell you this much—"

Natalie looked at him, her eyebrows raised.

"—You're not going to be very popular around the Moorefield household for a while, and you'd better give Grace a peace offering when you come back," he warned.

"You just be nice to her," Natalie scolded, "she's one of our best technicians."

It took Natalie a few more minutes to escape Moorefield's office and, after a quick stop to the lab to pick up her own, private journal, she was on her way back home. She had three whole days, counting

today, to figure out what in hell she was going to do.

"Hey, honey," she called as she opened her front door, "I'm home!"

Sydney came bounding out of the bedroom at the sound of her voice.

"Well, Sydney," Natalie talked to her cat as she took off her boots and hung up her coat, "you got me all to yourself for three whole days." She looked down as the cat rubbed his head against her leg. "I can tell, you're thrilled.

She went to the kitchen and plugged in the kettle for tea, then went and changed into a pair of sweats. She hung up her clothes, put the bedroom in order and emerged just as the kettle clicked off. She unconsciously reached for the real stuff, then thought better and made herself a cup of herbal tea.

Natalie curled up on the couch with her steaming mug. Sydney followed settling on her lap.

"Okay, Sydney," she said, putting the mug down, "let's look at this logically."

Sydney purred away.

"Okay, logically, I can't possibly be pregnant because A," she said, holding up one finger, "I haven't had sex with anyone in over two years. Yes," she scratched the cat's ears, "it's been one hell of a dry spell. B, even if these dreams I've been having about Nick *did* happen, it couldn't be him 'cause vampires can't reproduce sexually—at least I don't think they can? No, they can't. And C—what's C? I forgot." She sat staring at her three fingers for a moment. "Well, it really doesn't matter, because that test result," she nodded toward the lab sheet she'd swiped from Charlie's office, which was now laying on her coffee table, "says, unequivocally, the rabbit died."

She abruptly stood and started pacing nervously around her tiny flat. Sydney was only mildly indignant about being dumped on the floor. Wisely, he jumped back on the couch knowing full well that Natalie would resume her seat sooner or later. Why wear himself out trying to follow her when she would undoubtedly end up where she began? He'd just wait her out.

Natalie resumed her seat on the couch. Sydney was one smart cat. This time, he curled up beside her. Absentmindedly, she stroked his gray fur.

"Charlie says that I'm about a month gone. Where was I about a month ago?" She leaned back and thought for a moment. "Right," she said, "I went to New York for the American Board of Pathologists meeting. I didn't . . . no, I *definitely* would have remembered. Okay, did I meet anyone new? Yeah, there were a lot of new faces at the meeting. Okay," she sighed, "where did I go while I was there?" She thought for several long minutes, trying to recall everything she did while she was in New York City. She suddenly sat upright. "Wait a minute. I went to see that weird lady in the purple dress down in the Village for Nick." Natalie shivered. "She gave me the creeps."

Natalie scratched her ear, then reached for her mug of tea—she stopped in mid-motion. "Right. She gave me the box for Nick; I came back and gave it to him and right afterwards he started getting sick. Remember?" she asked Sydney.

Sydney wasn't paying attention, he was giving himself a bath.

"Yeah," Natalie's heart rate increased as she began to put the pieces together. "And I went over to the loft 'cause I was so worried about him, and it started to snow, and I stayed over and," she stopped. She could feel herself blush, "I woke up in his bed, na—" she began to perspire. "Let's back up some hours. Think, damn it," she chided herself, "think!"

"Calm, be calm." She took several deep breaths. "He wasn't there when I arrived, I remember that much. When he did come in?" she asked herself. It took a few minutes of concentrated effort; she closed her eyes and took herself back in time to that particular evening. She saw herself enter the loft, throw her coat on the drafting table and call for Nick; she saw herself starting a fire in the fireplace with the remote,

and pace around the downstairs of the loft, waiting for his return.

"He finally came in about an hour later," she said looking to Sydney, "frozen, soaked to the skin, shivering and with glass in his hand." She leaned back and closed her eyes again, picturing that evening. It started playing out like a B movie.

Nick looked at her, still not quite believing, needing her confirmation. "I am alive? Mortal?"

"I wouldn't test it with a knife or a noose, but . . . yeah."

The tears still sparkled at the corner of her eyes. Nick opened his hand and the doll dropped to the table, forgotten. He placed his hands on Natalie's shoulder and hugged her tightly, lifting her feet from the ground . . . with the strength of a mortal man.

. . . "Natalie—I'm mortal."

. . . As he kissed her a fire began to spark to life deep within her and she wound her arms around his neck, her hands reaching up the back of his neck to bring his face closer to hers. She opened her mouth and breathed into his, moaning in pleasure.

"Oh my God, Sydney," Natalie gasped, the perspiration dripping down her side as the realization hit her, "it was Nick, I remember." Suddenly every detail was imprinted in her mind—the laughter, the loving and the joy of being alive. She smiled as she rubbed her abdomen, the tears silently coursing down her cheeks. "I remember," she whispered, "and I'm going to have Nick's baby."

Chapter Fourteen

Starting out in the pre-dawn hours, Schanke had arrived in Manotik by mid-morning. A gray and overcast day, threatening to snow . . . again. The weather people were predicting another winter storm and he was determined to get back to Toronto before the predicted start.

Then again, the storm might pass; he'd heard on the radio as he was driving that their chances of being dumped on again were now seventy-five/thirty. As he turned down the correct street he mumbled, "Probably start when I'm past the halfway point going back. Now, where? Ah, here we are."

Schanke pulled up in front of the apartment building, parked his car; got out and locked the door. He ambled up to the entrance way, studied the name tags along side the door buzzers and pressed the one marked 'Lascombe.' And, after identifying himself, he was let in.

Mark and Anne Lascombe were in their late twenties and had been married all of three weeks.

"I don't know what else we can tell you, Detective Schanke." Mark handed Schanke a cup of coffee. "Like I told you on the phone yesterday, we were on our honeymoon and weren't really paying any attention to anybody."

"Well," Schanke replied setting the cup and saucer down on the coffee table, "you never really know how much you remember *not* seeing or hearing until you try." He pulled out his notebook and pen. "Let's see. You said you checked in late on Saturday night, right?"

"That's right. We had driven straight from the reception and didn't get to the hotel until around two in the morning. That would have been Sunday morning." Anne Lascombe was quite pretty when she blushed as she was doing now, obviously remembering their first night at the hotel. She was fair, with an oval face surrounded by long dark brown hair. "We tried not to make too much noise so as not to wake anybody up."

"Did you ever meet the person occupying the room next to yours?" Schanke asked, he looked at both Mark and Anne in turn.

"No," Anne said with a shake of her head.

Mark didn't respond immediately. "You know," he said slowly, "I may have seen him late Sunday afternoon. Do you have a picture of him?" he asked.

Schanke opened his briefcase and withdrew an enlarged employee photograph he had obtained from Calluori's employer. He passed it to Mark Lascombe remarking, "It's a good enough likeness but you know how employee photographs are, they make you look like you're a member of the 'ten most wanted.'"

Mark Lascombe studied the photograph. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's him. I went down to the lobby to try and get a paper; it was pretty late, you know? Anyway, as I was coming back down the hall I saw someone locking the door next to our room."

"What time was that?" Schanke asked, making notes.

"Oh, around six or so." Mark handed the photograph over to his new wife, then leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. He was average height, with the build and cockiness of a college jock. His hair was blond and his eyes were green.

Anne was studying the photograph then looked at Schanke in surprise. "I remember seeing him. With a woman," she said.

"What woman?" Schanke asked. "When?"

"Remember, honey?" She turned to her husband. "It was just before we went out to get something to eat, probably around ten/eleven or so, when I put the breakfast card on the door handle?"

"Somewhere around then."

"Anyway," she said, "I opened the door to put the card on the door and I saw them next door."

"Who?" Schanke asked.

"This man," she waved the picture in her hand, "and he had a woman with him."

"What'd she look like?"

"God, let me think," Anne said as she leaned back in her chair with her eyes closed. "She was real short, no more than about four foot eleven, I'd say. Long chestnut colored hair and she had on a navy blue parka with a white cable knit sweater underneath. I remember cause I was kinda starting, you know, and she looked right at me and smiled. She wasn't a raving beauty, if you know what I mean but very striking, and she had the weirdest eyes."

"Weird. In what way?" Schanke looked up from his notebook.

"Well, she looked back at me and smiled and I remember being afraid for a minute. They were . . . intense. I know," she said, as she leaned forward, "it was like a cat looks when it's about to pounce on a mouse or something. Anyway, she gave me the creeps and I shut the door real quick. Funny," she leaned back into the cushions of the chair, "I didn't remember that until just now. Weird."

"Yeah," Schanke mumbled. They had ID'd Marnina Maxwell as positively going into the victim's room probably on the night he was murdered. It was something anyway. He passed around some mug shots of men, hoping that they were a little more forthcoming about who they saw leaving the room later that evening.

"Sorry," Mark responded, shaking his head as he shuffled through stack of photographs. "Like I told you on the phone, Detective—we only saw his back. He was tall, had what looked like a black trench coat on, black fedora hat." He looked up in surprise. "Hey, I remember now, he stood for a minute with his back to me and put his hat on. I'd swear that his hair was brown."

"Light or dark?"

Mark thought for a moment. "Light," he said.

"Well, it never hurts to try," Schanke said, as he took back the photographs. "Mrs. Lascombe, would you be able to swear in court to the description of the woman?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied, "if I have to."

"Thanks." Schanke put his notebook away and closed his briefcase. "Guess I'll head back."

"Hope you make it back before the storm hits," Anne Lascombe said.

"With my luck," Schanke stated as he rose from the couch, "it'll probably strike when I'm in the middle of nowhere."

"Just make sure you've got enough gas," Mark said as he followed Schanke to the door.

Nick was relieved when it started to snow. It meant even more diffuse sunlight to deal with during his afternoon drive to the financial canyon on Bay Street. It was winter so wide scarf, long coat with the collar pulled up to cover his neck, and gloves covering his hands were normal. Only the sunglasses might look a little out of place. His appointment with Jonathan Green had been carefully arranged. Nick inspected himself in the mirror and approved of the three-piece navy blue pin striped suit, light blue silk shirt, conservative burgundy tie and black wing-tipped shoes. He looked the part, he decided, shrugging into his black leather coat.

The drive to the corporate office of the Canadian National Bank, on Bay Street between Adelaide and King, was relatively easy—no smoldering flesh to spoil the image thanks to the storm. He pulled into the underground garage and breathed a sigh of relief; picked up his cellular phone and tried Schanke at the station. Schanke had made it back and reported his conversation with the Lascombes.

Nick presented himself to Mr. Green's secretary at a few minutes past three-thirty and sat down to await admittance to the inner sanctum. He wasn't nervous about the impending interview—uneasy for some reason yes, but not nervous.

"Mr. Knight?" The secretary spoke as she rose from her desk and walked toward an imposing set of double doors. "If you'll follow me, please?"

"Thanks." Nick stood, folding his coat over his arm and followed the young lady.

She opened the doors, saying, "Mr. Green is just finishing an emergency meeting. He should be with you shortly. Can I get you something? Coffee? Tea, perhaps?"

"No," Nick said as he stood looking around the very large office, "no thanks. I'm fine."

"Then, if you'll just have a seat," she indicated the chairs facing the glass table at the far end of the room, "Mr. Green will be right with you." She silently backed out of the room and softly closed the door behind her.

Nick draped his coat over the back of one of the two elegant, cloth covered Queen Anne chairs. What a mixture of styles, Nick thought, as he glanced around the office. There was modern in the choice of the glass table for a desk, and Victorian in the choice of the love seat and coffee table in the one corner. He wouldn't have been surprised to see something French or Italian Provincial if he looked hard enough.

The room was itself unusual; impersonal, almost stark, as if no one worked there, ever. The bottom half of the far back wall was walnut paneling, the top half all green-tinted windows tilting outwards from the middle of the wall to the ceiling, with a fine sheer curtain covering hanging in place. Subdued lighting took away any shadows, giving the room a restful feel to it. The wall to the right of the desk held a bank of recessed television monitors, and three-quarters of the wall to the left of the desk there hung an extremely large and unusual painting.

It looked like the somber work of Caspar Friedrich. His depiction of an entombment in winter; snow covered the ground and what trees he'd envisioned were barren. A line of mourners trailed the deceased to his or her final resting place with bowed heads. Nick was drawn to it, almost lost in its depressing subject matter, when Green entered the room.

"Detective Knight," Green said as he entered, letting the door swing shut behind him, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." He walked directly to the middle of the room and stood, watching Nick.

"This painting, I know it."

"Oh?"

"Hmm. '... to cease upon midnight with no pain ...,'" Nick murmured.

"Keats, isn't it? He was a bit effusive for my tastes, but I did enjoy what he had to say about this piece. Are you are a connoisseur of art?"

Nick pulled his gaze away from the painting to observe everything about the eminent banker. Tall, about six foot or so; light brown hair, steel-cold blue eyes, fair complexion with a shadow of a beard. Dressed impeccably in a charcoal gray suit, white silk shirt and black Gucci loafers. He appeared at ease with himself and the situation at hand. Nick wondered why such a man would have a painting, with death as its subject matter, hanging in his office. Curious.

"No, not really a connoisseur. Just know what I like," Nick responded. "This reminds me of a painting by Friedrich, 'Cloister Graveyard in the Snow.' But I thought that was destroyed in the war?"

"It's a very good . . . copy, isn't it? I thought that work was fairly unknown." Green offered only a slight turning of his lips as he stood watching Nick.

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Detective Nick Knight, Metro PD" Nick held out his right hand and returned the calculating stare.

Green, hesitantly took his hand and shook it briefly, his eyebrows rose in question. "You're . . . cold. Shall I raise the thermostat?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine," Nick thought quickly, "my hands are always cold, especially in winter."

"Winter, yes. I'm afraid," Green said, as he moved toward his desk, "I've become quite European and grown away from the custom of over-heated rooms. More moderate temperatures help to keep one alert, don't you agree?"

"What part of Australia are you from?" Nick asked in an attempt to steer the conversation away from himself.

"Queensland," Green commented indifferently, as he indicated, with a wave of his hand, that Nick should take one of the chairs in front of his desk. "But it's been many years since I've lived there. I presume you have some sort of identification?" he asked, turning and watching Nick take the few steps to meet him.

Nick handed over the small leather case containing his shield and ID card. He could feel Green's penetrating stare and sensed a touch of . . . fear, apprehension? He wasn't quite sure. He sat, casually crossed his legs and made a mental note to check deeper into Green's background. He sensed deception as well, and evasion and something else he couldn't quite grasp.

"How can I help you, Detective?" Green placed himself behind his glass table desk and was offering the wallet back.

"We're investigating a recent death discovered in the Royal York Hotel," Nick said as he retrieved his ID. "Do you know this woman?" He took the artist sketch of Marnina Maxwell out of his inside jacket pocket, unfolded it and placed on top of the table.

Green retrieved the paper, looked at it and laid it back down. "It's a very good likeness of a . . . friend and business associate of mine."

"May I ask who, please?" Nick was trying his best to be polite and correct as Stonetree ordered.

"Ms. Marnina Maxwell," Green answered. "Is she in some sort of trouble?"

"I'm afraid this person was seen with the victim shortly before his death. Do you know her well?" Nick stared directly into Green's eyes, attempting to urge the truth from an apparently hesitant mortal. He was tiring of Green's verbal games, it was wasting his time.

Green easily broke eye contact and look toward the door behind Nick. "Ms. Maxwell is the . . . owner of this bank and several others in various capitals in the world. I highly doubt she would be involved in something so sordid as a . . . murder."

"Do you have a photograph of Ms. Maxwell?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Ms. Maxwell is quite an eccentric, a private person really, and refrains from having her photograph taken. Why do you ask?"

Nick was taken aback. "Maybe the person we're looking for is someone different altogether." This was not what he had envisioned Marnina Maxwell to be at all. "We have positive identification of a Marnina Maxwell meeting the victim in the bar and accompanying him to his room later in the evening." He gazed intently into Green's steel blue eyes. "How well do you know Marnina Maxwell?"

Green was silent for a few moments, seemingly locked again into Nick's penetrating stare. Finally, with a firm shake of his head, he broke eye contact and looked down at the platinum Monte Blanc pen

within his reach. He picked up the pen and toyed with it for a few moments still silent.

Nick tried another tactic. "We need to question Ms. Maxwell. Do you know where we might be able to contact her?"

Green's head jerked upright and he looked at Nick with a worried frown. It took him several moments to respond. "Marnina and I share a house in Rosedale." He took a small piece of plain paper, uncapped the pen and wrote several lines, then passed it along toward Nick. "I would call first to make sure she's at home before just dropping by—her days are quite busy."

"Isn't mixing your personal and professional life a bit awkward at times?" Nick looked down at the address and phone number but was very aware of Green's glaring response. He folded the paper in half and placed it in his pocket. "Thank you. When did you last see her?" Nick attempted to keep his expression innocent of his deeper suspicions.

When Green didn't respond immediately, he added, "I realize this is difficult for you, however, this is a murder investigation."

"We luncheoned today," Green finally admitted.

"May I ask which restaurant you met at?"

Green smiled as he leaned back into his chair. "No restaurant, Detective Knight. I grabbed hot dogs from a vendor and Marina and I met at Nathan Phillips Square. We sat on the bench facing the new City Hall. Despite the cold and impending snow, Marnina always enjoys fresh air and sunshine. We didn't stay long, I had a one o'clock meeting with the Board of Directors."

Nick frowned in thought, watching Green's movements. Could he be wrong about her? He was beginning to have doubts. His suspicions implied that Maxwell was a vampire, but he knew from personal experience that vampires couldn't walk in daylight, no matter how diffuse, and they didn't eat hot dogs.

Green rose from his chair and went to the corner of the office. He touched an unseen button and the sheer curtains silently slid away from the window, letting in more daylight. He watched as Nick sat a little straighter in his chair. "I've known Ms. Maxwell for a very long time," he said, "I find it hard to believe she would involve herself in murder. But then, there're always something new to learn about people. Isn't there?" Green responded with a smile that matched the outdoor temperature at the moment. Hiding his trembling hand in his pants pocket, he remained in the corner of the room, putting another barrier between himself the police. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" he asked, trying to bring the interview to a close. "I do have other things to attend to."

"One more thing," Nick asked as he too rose and stood behind the chair, picking up his coat. "Do you know where Ms. Maxwell was from about midnight to eight a.m., Monday, January 24th?"

"Yes."

"Where?" Nick's eyebrows were raised in question.

"I think I should wait until our attorney is present before answering any more questions. Now," Green said as he moved back to his desk and pressed a button on the desk phones, "if you'll excuse me?" He sat down and picked up the receiver, "Miss Murray, get me Stan Oliver, please." He totally ignored the police detective.

"I think you've answered all my questions for now. Thank you for your time."

Nick took the hint, turned and walked slowly out of the office. There was something definitely odd about Jonathan Green. The interview had lasted a bit longer than he'd expected and he was glad to feel the sun setting at last. He smiled at Miss Murray, the secretary, as he quietly closed the door behind him. "Thank you," he said, as he shrugged into his coat.

"Miss Murray, has Detective Knight gone yet?"

"He's just entered the elevator."

"Then hold on that call to Oliver," Jon spoke into the phone. "Get me Ms. Maxwell at home. If she's not there keep trying until you find her. I *must* speak to her before speaking with anyone else." He drummed his fingers on the glass table as he waited. Finally the intercom buzzed and Marnina was announced as waiting on line six.

"Darling, I'm glad I caught you before you went out again." Jon's voice trembled slightly, an urgent tone to it. "I think we may have a problem."

"What has happened?" Marnina asked softly.

"I've just been visited by the police."

"Oh," she responded. "And what did they have to say?"

"They've positively identified you as being with the victim the night he was murdered," he said, frowning in worry. "I think you may be their prime suspect."

"Who conducted the interview?"

"A Detective Knight." Jon swiveled around in his chair to look at the city skyline. "There is something very, strange about him."

"Ah. Nicholas Knight. Yes."

Jon could hear the slight smile. "You know him?" Jon hesitated, then plunged ahead. "Marnina . . . I . . . think he's a . . . vampire," he breathed the last word knowing that only Marnina, with her sensitive hearing, would know what he'd said.

Marnina hesitated, which confirmed Jon's worst fears. "He is," she said simply.

Jon paused in thought, watching the snow pelt the window. "There's a Board of Directors meeting in Paris on Wednesday evening. I think we should be present."

"No," Marnina responded quickly, "we can cover that meeting by video relay. There is still work to be done here in Toronto. I *must* meet with Detective Knight."

"Darling," Jon tried to be reasonable, "I think it's too dangerous. I think we should leave. *Soon*."

"We will," Marnina stated softly before hanging up. "Just not yet."

Chapter Fifteen

Nick braved the storm and walked to Saul's small shop on Bloor, picked up Natalie's watch, then trudged back to his car in the underground garage on Bay. His shoes were soaked and now uncomfortably cold. He contemplated going home and changing before going into work. He dialed the Coroner's office from his cellular phone.

"Grace?" he asked. "Let me speak to Natalie."

"She's not in, Detective," Grace answered. "Won't be back until Wednesday evening, God help us."

"Vacation?"

"No, not really," Grace said. Nick could tell from the tone in her voice she was debating on whether she should add whatever she wanted to add. "Rumor is," Grace finally said in almost a whisper, "she's having family problems."

"But—?"

"You got it. What family?" Grace butted in. "Her father died years ago; her only sibling died last year, and she just heard from her mother last week and everything was fine. So, what's going on, *Detective*?"

"Ah, Grace . . . your guess is as good as mine," he said, before quickly cutting the connection. He immediately dialed Natalie's home number, let it ring and waited while the answering machine went through its usual speech. The beep tone was long and Nick judged there were quite a few messages, mostly his from the last several days, then relayed yet another message. "Nat, it's Nick. *Please* call me. I'm worried about you."

He cut the connection, looked at the phone in his hand and tried to decide what to do. Go directly into work and get ribbed about the suit? Or, go home, change, try and call Natalie again, then go into work and report on his interview with Green? Or . . .

The hell with it, Nick decided, as he jammed the key into the ignition and started the Caddy, his cold, wet shoes totally forgotten.

The drive to Natalie's apartment was pure hell and Nick judged he'd only made it in one piece because of the Caddy's tremendous weight and traction. The snow was coming down steadily and the wind howled. The roads were icy and jammed with cars sliding every which way as people desperately attempted to get home. Finally, Nick parked in front of Natalie's building, looked up to her window in the front and saw the light shining. As he suspected, she just wasn't answering the phone.

"Okay," he muttered, "now what?" Nick stared at the window for a few minutes, put his hand in his pocket and touched the watch, then opened the car door and entered the snowy twilight. He gave the car door a good swing shut as he ran for the front of the building. The leather soles of his shoes slid on the packed snow. He almost fell, but caught himself by grabbing the front door handle.

The door was opened by an eight-year-old girl who had been watching the storm. "Boy, mister," she said, as she shivered in the cold, "you looked real funny running up the walk. Why don't you got boots on?"

"Ah—" Nick smiled down at the precocious child. "Forgot them. Thanks."

"No sweat," she said, then turned and ran down to the basement as Nick proceeded to slowly climb the steps to Natalie's second floor apartment.

He knocked on the door before his courage deserted him, and waited. He could feel her presence on the other side as she peered through the peep hole into the corridor. He wondered briefly if she would invite him in or just ignore him. He remained silent, letting her make the decision. Finally, he heard the chain being slipped and watched as the door opened slowly. Natalie stood facing him, no make up and dressed only in a pair of black sweats, hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi," she said, the corners of her mouth bending into a slight smile.

"Ah." Nick slouched against the door jamb. "I was worried about you."

"I'm okay," Natalie said. All of a sudden a gray line streamed out the door around Nick's legs and down the stairs, making a bee-line for the front door. "Sydney!" Natalie called, "Damn it!"

Nick turned and was at the front door before the cat, carefully picking him up and carrying him back up the stairs. The cat hissed in his arms. He gladly handed him back to Nat, then heard the phone beginning to ring.

Nat took the cat then turned and ran for the phone. "Hello," she said, "hang on a minute." She cradled the receiver against her shoulder, still holding the cat, her eyes going to Nick, still standing in the doorway. "Come in," she called, "I'll—I'll only be a minute." Then she went back to the phone, ignoring him.

Nick entered the apartment and quietly closed the door behind him before Sydney could make a second escape. Natalie dropped the cat on the floor and Nick watched as he slouched off toward the bedroom. He didn't want to, but couldn't help himself, as he listened in on her phone conversation.

"Nat, how ya doin'?"

"I'm fine, Charlie, really," Natalie replied patiently. "Really."

"Did you call you gynecologist for an appointment like you promised?"

"Yes, I did," she replied, with an exaggerated sigh. "I've got an appointment with Dr. Nachame on Wednesday morning."

"That's my girl. You need anything?"

"No, I'm fine, really." Natalie looked to Nick then looked down to her bare feet. "Honest."

"Okay," Charlie said, "just checking. Keep in touch, okay?"

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise. I gotta go, just got some company," Natalie teased, as she twisted the phone cord through her fingers.

Nick had walked to her living room area while eavesdropping on her conversation. He glanced down on the table and spotted a piece of paper with the University Hospital heading on it; seating himself on the couch, he picked it up and read it. His eyes focused on an item labeled pregnancy and noted the check mark in the positive box. Natalie was pregnant! That's what was wrong with her.

Natalie was pregnant

"Nick?" Natalie said softly, noting the paper in his hand.

Holding the paper out to her, his eyes unable to meet hers, he said, "I'm—I'm really happy for you." There was a smile on his lips but his eyes were unable to hide the hurt.

"Nick—" Her reply was no more than a whisper.

"I," he stopped, took a breath, then started again. "I guess this, Charlie fella," he gestured toward the phone and stopped. Nick rose from the couch and started toward the door. "I'd better go," he finally said.

"Nick—" Natalie said again, grabbing for his arm as he passed her.

He eluded her touch and reached for the door handle, the hand which had been jammed in his coat pocket touched against the watch. "Oh," he retrieved the watch from his pocket and handed it to her. "I found this the other day while I was cleaning." He was careful not to touch her, dropping the watch into her hand.

"Nick, will you stop!" Natalie yelled.

There was more than a hint of anger in her voice. Nick stood there in front of the door, facing her, his hands balled back into fists and jammed into his coat pockets. She looked so tiny and frail as she glared at him, but appearances could be deceiving. He knew her strength and moral fortitude. He wanted nothing more than to walk to her and hold her—he also knew that it was impossible. She was beyond his reach now, forever.

Slowly she stroked the watch with her thumb, noticing the new leather band, the anger slowly ebbing away. "Where—" she whispered, "where did you find this?"

"I told you—I was cleaning and . . . found it."

"Where?" Natalie looked at the watch in her hand, then stared directly at Nick. "Where *exactly* did you find it?"

"Ah—"

"Where, Nick?" Natalie persisted.

Nick shifted from one foot to another and looked down at his wet shoes, then looked back at Natalie, who hadn't taken her eyes from him for a moment. "It was jammed between the night stand and bed in my bedroom," he finally replied. He was surprised by the smile that began to light up her face, that went from her mouth to her eyes like a bright ray of sunshine. "What?"

"Oh, Nick," she replied, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "Oh God, will you stop standing there like the big dummy you are? Take your coat off—take off those wet shoes before you catch your death." She walked to him, took his arm and dragged him toward the living room.

Nick followed like a truant little boy, sat back on the couch, shrugged out of his coat, then kicked off his shoes. He had to admit, his feet felt . . . better out of the wet leather.

"What are *you* all dressed up for?" Natalie asked, as she picked up the shoes and placed them on the heat vent. "You look like you're ready for a stockbroker's meeting. Nice suit, by the way."

"Ah—" Nick was still a little dazed by her sudden change in attitude. "I interviewed Jonathan Green this afternoon."

"The Jonathan Green?" Natalie whistled. "Wow."

"Does everyone in the world know who this guy is but me?" Nick grumbled.

"Maybe you should start reading the financial section of the paper rather than the sports section." Natalie looked at him with raised eyebrows. "So, okay, maybe you should start reading the paper, period."

Nick couldn't stand it anymore. He was missing something, he knew—something *important*—and Natalie wasn't about to go into it unless he pressed. He rose and quickly took her by the shoulders preventing her from moving anywhere. "Will you *please* tell me what's going on? I can't stand it when you're mad at me and I don't know what I've done but you're mad I can tell—what?" He stopped babbling long enough to ask, as she smiled at him. "What?"

"I'm going to have a baby," she said softly.

"I know," he replied, then turned away. He faced her again when he felt her hand on his arm.

"Your baby," she whispered, still smiling.

"No," he denied with a shake of his head, "it's not possible."

"Oh," she replied with conviction, "but you're wrong."

"Natalie—" Nick took her by the shoulders and sat her on the couch. "You're deluding yourself. You know what I am. You know that procreation for a vampire is . . . just not possible." His mind briefly touched on Erica and the long conversations they had about just that subject.

Natalie touched his face. "I know that," she said softly. She leaned back into the cushions of the couch, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But what if," she said, "what if, for just a few hours you were mortal again. What then?"

Nick shook his head. "That's—that couldn't happen. No way. Besides, you're a doctor. You know we haven't—And we'd have to—But we *haven't*—You wouldn't be *here* if we had."

"Okay," Natalie reached out to take his hands in hers. "Tell me something?"

"Sure. What?"

"Have you, ah," she paused, and Nick saw the blush start at her neck line and rise, "been having some, ah," she paused again then looked to the wall opposite where they were sitting, "erotic—?"

"No," he said quickly. Too quickly, he realized, as he looked into her brown eyes and saw that she knew the denial to be a lie. She just smiled at him. "Ah—" he stammered and he could feel the droplets of blood bead on his palms. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his hands. "Ah—" he stammered again, looking away from her, but then added softly in defeat, "how did you know?"

He looked at her shyly, and asked softly, "Not you?"

"You silly goose," Natalie chuckled, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

His felt his fingers curl around her hand. "So, okay," he admitted finally, pulling his hand free, "what if I—we have. It doesn't mean anything."

"What if it does?"

"Natalie, just because we fantasize about something happening doesn't mean it ever can or could. Even I know that!"

Natalie began to chuckle, which turned into a laughing fit as she doubled over holding her stomach.

"Natalie, will you stop laughing at me!" Nick had never been more embarrassed in all his eight hundred years. In fact, he could truthfully say he was mortified by Natalie's response.

"I'm sorry," Natalie said, wiping her eyes, "you're right. It's not funny. But, oh Nick, the look on your face!" She started to giggle again.

"Natalie, I'm warning you!" Nick admonished, rising as if to leave.

"Okay. I promise to stop. Just give me a minute." Natalie sat back. She took a deep breath, then turned back to Nick and again took both his hands in hers. "You have to understand, I didn't want to believe it either. I kept arguing that it just wasn't possible. But Charlie—"

"Who's Charlie?" Nick interrupted quickly. He'd wanted to ask her that since he'd walked in and didn't have the nerve.

Natalie smiled, "He's an old *friend* from medical school. I went to see him on Saturday because I haven't been feeling well." She looked at Nick and quickly decided to make a long story shorter. "It doesn't matter. When I was confronted by the facts, and thought about it *logically*, one step at a time . . . I remembered everything. And that's what you have to do."

"Remember *what*?" Nick looked at her as if she was from the planet Mars. "Natalie, whatever you've decided it's just not possible for a vampire to beget children."

"I *know* that," Natalie sighed. "Okay let's forget that point for a minute, okay?"

"But—"

"Nick!"

"All right," Nick agreed finally, deciding that since she *was* pregnant, it might be a good idea to humor her.

Natalie swallowed. "About six weeks ago I went to New York City for a medical seminar, remember?"

"Yeah."

"And you asked me to go down to the Village and pick up a package for you. Do you remember that?"

Nick thought for a minute. The memory was elusive, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. "Sort of," he responded, "but—"

"Try, Nick," Natalie urged, tightening her grip on his hands, "you've *got* to break through. Remember? I brought it back. It was a little wicker doll with red dots for eyes and a mouth? Remember?"

"How did you know about that?" Nick whispered, vividly recalling the nightmare image of the doll and the strange lady in the dress that changed colors.

"Why?" Natalie urged. "Have you been having dreams about it?"

"Yeah But how do you—"

"It happened Nick. It really happened." Natalie squeezed his hands. "Nick, you've got to remember that doll."

Nick leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. Suddenly he saw the tiny doll, no bigger than his thumb, cradled in the small white box; eyes and mouth painted with dots, clothing consisting of a piece of red and gold patterned fabric, and the hair painted brown. He remembered the doll. "It was real," he breathed.

"Yes," Natalie gave a sigh of relief, "it *was* real. Now, try and remember what happened when you started carrying that thing around."

She watched intently as Nick closed his eyes; she held his hands when they began to tremble and his eyes flew open and he pulled away from her. She could read the horror in his eyes as the events began to unfold in his mind.

"It all happened," she reminded him softly, "all of it."

"Oh, God," Nick said as he scooped her into his arms and gently held her close, "I could have killed you."

"No," she said with a shake of her head, pulling away, "you couldn't have. Not *then*."

Nick looked at Natalie in amazement as the realization dawned on him. "I *was* mortal, wasn't I?"

Outside the storm increased its intensity until one was unable to see the road ahead.

Chapter Sixteen

The landscape had all the trappings of the tundra in Antarctica. The storm had raged for hours, with new snow covering all the layers that had come before. The wind would howl for a time, suddenly cease its madness, then start anew. Inside the mock-Tudor house, set on a quiet corner in the suburb of Rosedale, the argument kept pace with the storm. The scent of the hickory logs burning in the fireplace bathed the room in a comfortable glow.

"Marnina, for once in your long life, I don't think you're thinking clearly about this." Jon had been pacing around the study, hands jammed in his sweater pockets and a worried frown creased his face.

Snow pelted the bay windows and the wind shrieked as if in anger. A fire blazed in the fireplace and Marnina stared silently into its dancing flames. She shivered, not from the temperature, she rarely felt anything but extreme ranges of hot and cold and then only when she'd been exposed to them for long periods. No, the reaction was to what was to come, and she wondered if she was adequately prepared for it.

"Are you even listening?" Jon knelt in front of her and took her hands in his. "Have you heard anything I've said?"

Marnina smiled and looked deeply into the blue depths of his eyes. "Oh, yes," she leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose, "I've heard every word, listened to the timbre of your voice and please believe me," she gently pulled free to hold his face between her hands. She smiled again, "I do understand your concern, but it's unfounded."

"Is it?" Jon studied her, rose from his kneeling position to sit next to her on the sofa. "You tell me that Knight is a vampire. Okay, I accept that. You, after all, should know." He smirked, then frowned again. "But he frightens me, Marnina, he really does." He visibly shivered, then took a breath before continuing. "I mean, he could have killed me, right there in my office; snapped me like a twig. He knew that I was evading his answers; he knew I was withholding information. My God, he even tried to hypnotize me, but it didn't work. I tell you, he's not going to give up so easily."

"No," Marnina sighed, "he never does."

"What is a vampire doing on the Toronto police force, anyway?"

Marnina chuckled as she leaned back into the cushions. "As Janette puts it, he's trying to repay society for hunting humans for centuries, or some such nonsense. And no, Jon," Marnina was serious when she studied the worry lines in his face, "he would *not* have killed you. Nicholas hasn't intentionally killed for sustenance for over a hundred years."

"Is he like . . . you then?"

"No," she shook her head sadly, "he doesn't *know* of the way of the light." She sighed deeply, sadly, then rose and went to sit by the bay window to watch the storm.

Jon went to her and leaned against the wall. The chill from the wind seeped through the windows and caused him to pull his sweater tighter around him. "If he's not like you, and he doesn't kill for human blood anymore, then what does he live on?"

"Animal blood," Marnina looked up to his curious stare. "Come," she rose from the window and took his hand tugging him back toward the fire, "you're cold standing there. Come here where it's warm." She pulled him down to sit before the fire. "Nicholas Knight was the reason why I chose to move to

Toronto," she began to explain and when Jon opened his mouth to question she placed her fingers against his lips. "Just listen and not question until I'm through, okay?"

Jon nodded and Marnina drew her legs up to her chest and rested her face on her knees, her mind racing to put her thoughts into coherent words and phrases that he would understand and accept without question.

"The way in which one is brought across into eternity sometimes determines the way in which one spends eternity," she began then looked to Jon. "I'm not saying this right am I?" Confusion was the predominant thought spread across his face.

"Not quite, but I think I get your meaning." Jon rose and went to the bar on the far side of the room. He reached for a bottle of wine, opened it and poured some in a glass. He returned to sit on the floor beside her. "You mean that if you're brought across by violence, you sustain yourself by violence—violence begets violence."

"Yes," she nodded, "and no. Man, human beings, are violent by nature. We are, all of us, just a higher level of the animal world. And animals are predatory by nature. It is the law of nature that makes us that way. But it's how we are taught to control our baser instincts that makes us different from all the rest. As humans, we are taught at a very early age that it is wrong to kill another human but it is all right to kill an animal, such as a cow or chicken for food. Once we enter the vampire world we learn that it is human blood that sustains us and we learn to kill humans because *they* now are our food source. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think I do." Jon shook his head. "I just don't think I would be capable of killing someone even if I were starving to death."

"Oh," Marnina nodded, "you have yet to experience the blood lust, the incessant need to consume every drop until the heart stops; an ecstasy of the kill along with satisfying a hunger that never ends. Oh yes, Jon," Marnina looked up to him and nodded sadly, "you would kill and very efficiently too. You would be unable to stop yourself."

"But, you—"

She held up her finger to stop him and continued. "When you choose to follow the path of the light, as I have, you make a conscious choice to control the hunger. You find the ecstasy in loving and in walking in the light again; over time the blood lust diminishes until only in times of extreme anger does it rise again. If unchecked, you can wreak terrible havoc."

"Okay," Jon took a sip of wine, "you said we moved to Toronto because of Knight. But we've been here almost five years—"

"And so has Nicholas," she said softly.

"Why is he so special?"

"You aren't jealous, are you?" There was a note in Jon's voice that made Marnina's heart expand as it spoke of his love for her and his need to know that she was his alone, not to be shared with anyone else. She reached to touch his hand, "You have no need to be, if that is the case."

She moved away from the fire to sit again on the love seat and looked down at him as he watched her. "For the past several hundred years Nicholas has been searching for a way to cross back over," she stated simply.

"He wants to be mortal again?" Jon voice rose incredulously.

"Yes, he does," Marnina nodded in agreement. "Incredible, isn't it? He feels certain that there *must* be a way back. I ran across him in Paris in the late 1800's and he was about to break with his Master, again."

"He doesn't remember you, then?"

"Jon," Marnina explained patiently, "a vampire *never* forgets anything. No, I made sure we did not meet. He wasn't ready to hear what I have to tell him. In fact, I'm not sure he is ready even now."

"You want to bring him into the light?"

"Yes. But before I can do that I need to make him realize that there is *no* way back; that there is no way to become mortal again. His quest is in vain. He must accept what he is and either arrange for his own true death or move forward as I have. He could learn that there is a way to live with mortals, to love mortals without killing them and to walk in the light again. To see the sun and to watch the seasons pass in the light. That there is a way not to be the evil creature of the night that he believes himself to be. But the way is not an easy one."

As Marnina spoke she drifted around the room, her fingers trailing book bindings, lifting ash trays then carefully setting them down. "They say it will end soon," she commented softly.

Jon was momentarily confused by her swift change in subject. Oh yes, he thought, the snow. "Should be over by morning."

Chapter Seventeen

But the blizzard didn't dissipate during the long hours of the night. The wind wailed endlessly, tree branches cracked and dropped under the pressure, temperatures rose a bit then plummeted downward. The homeless were either forced into shelters or froze to death where they lay. The good citizens of Toronto stayed warm and snug in their homes, and the bad ones were kept off the streets by something other than the police. And, as always, more snow fell.

By noon the following day it was all over except for the clean-up. The city plows endlessly traversed the main thoroughfares, while smaller vehicles began making inroads on the side streets and every kid eager to earn an extra twenty-five bucks hauled around a shovel. Torontonians were more than ready for spring to arrive. Unfortunately, it was more than two months away.

Schanke made it to the Division by six p.m. and was surprised not to find Knight waiting for him. He was even more surprised to find that Nick hadn't made it back since his interview with Green on Monday. The Division had run a skeleton crew for the last day and a half with officers camping out in the holding cells in the basement. The city had, literally, been shut down for the past twenty-four hours.

Schanke took his watery vending machine coffee back to his desk and attempted to put his notes on the Lascombe interview in order. His gaze constantly drifted to the cold winter wonderland scene outside. His mind snapped back to business as Captain Stonetree came in, stamping snow from his boots.

"Nice to see you join us, Schanke." He shrugged out of his coat, draped it over his arm, then tugged a navy blue ski cap off his head. A rather thick wool Black Watch plaid scarf was still wound around his neck. "Where's Knight?"

"Hasn't made it in yet, Captain," Schanke looked up from his typewriter. "Nice scarf."

Stonetree had been unwinding it from his neck. "A Christmas present from my kid. Tell him I want to see him when he shows his face," he said, on his way to his office.

"Sure. Anything wrong?"

Stonetree hesitated and turned back. "Nothing that can't wait until Knight comes in. Have you heard from him?"

"No." Schanke began shuffling reports on his desk, evading Stonetree's piercing gaze. "Not since the beginning of the storm on Monday."

Stonetree studied him for a second or two. "If he hasn't shown within the hour, start calling around. I want him in my office pronto, understand?"

"Got it," Schanke looked up and gave him a smile as weak as the now cold coffee sitting on his desk. "Why don't I try him at home now?" he suggested, with a sinking feeling of trouble in the pit of his stomach.

Stonetree thought for a moment. "Do it," he said, then turned back to his office and slammed the door shut.

"Shit," Schanke muttered, as he picked up the telephone receiver and punched in the numbers to Nick's loft. There was no answer and he hung up just as the machine kicked in. Why wasn't he surprised that Nick wasn't home?

After about thirty minutes, he felt the draft of cold air hit his feet again as someone else entered the station. A few seconds later Nick walked into their section and slouched in his chair.

"It's about time." Schanke leaned over his desk and spoke quietly. "I was just getting ready to send out the Mounties for you," he said, looking Knight up and down. "Where the hell have you been? Stonetree wants to see you."

Nick turned a blank stare to Schanke. "Why?"

"Why what?" Schanke's exasperation was evident. "You haven't been in since Monday, you haven't called in since Monday afternoon and it's now Wednesday night. You're not on vacation and you're not on sick leave—we've got a murder investigation going on, remember?"

"So?"

"Earth to Nick?" Schanke got up to lean against the edge of Nick's desk. "You feel all right?"

"I feel great, why?" Nick smiled as he leaned back in his chair, his coat still on and his boots dripping water on the linoleum floor.

"This is just not like you, pal. 'Mr. Conscientious' is slipping. Just where *were* you during our latest excuse for a weather pattern?" Schanke folded his arms across his chest and eyed Nick suspiciously. He'd seen that 'pleased with myself' smug smile too many times in the past, but never on Nick Knight's face.

His suspicions were confirmed when Nick blurted out, "Nat's."

Schanke took a few seconds to study Nick, taking in the regret that was now plastered all over his face, along with the slightly stupid smile. "It's about time," he said quietly. "You know," he continued to lecture, "it's not nice to mess around with a lady's feelings like you have with Natalie."

"Schanke, what are you talking about?"

"Only that it's been obvious to everyone but you how Nat feels about you, and how you feel about her. Natalie's a nice lady, good people. Treat her with respect," he warned.

"Oh? And since when did you appoint yourself my father?" Nick smiled warmly.

Schanke wasn't amused. "I mean it Nick. She's family, ya know? I don't want to see her hurt."

"Neither do I." Nick said quietly, and looked down at the pen he was playing with. Over and over he turned the pen, coat still on, silly smile playing havoc with his face. "Family's everything, isn't it?" he finally mumbled.

Schanke watched Nick for a few long minutes then suddenly started to laugh. "Well I'll be damned. You asked her to marry you, didn't you?"

"Huh? No," he finally denied, "no, I didn't."

"Then, what . . ." Schanke walked over to the vending machine and put in his money for another cup of watery coffee. As the coffee dripped down he stood there, intently studying Nick's expression, his demeanor, the way he still had his coat on, the blank, stunned smile, and the fact that he actually admitted spending the past twenty-four hours at Natalie's place, *with* Natalie, implying, perhaps, it wasn't the first time. He quickly put two and two together and mentally came up with three as he walked back to Nick's desk without the coffee. "Oh oh. Oh man, you don't mean . . ." he blurted out.

Nick just stared, smiling, not saying anything.

"Nat's pregnant." Schanke quietly voiced the obvious, rather than asking a question.

"Who told you?!" Nick was so startled that he nearly fell off his chair, then fear blanched his already pale complexion. "Oh God, who else knows?"

"Pal, your face told me the whole story," Schanke laughed, shaking his head. "Been there—done that—and will be paying for the T-shirt until I die. Oh man," he chuckled, "this is *great* news."

"Schanke—" Nick suddenly sobered and grabbed his arm. "Who *else* knows?"

"Nobody." Schanke couldn't stop laughing. "You should see your face!"

"Schanke, you can't say *anything*." When Schanke just chuckled and shook his head, Nick gave him a

slight push. "Listen to me. Natalie doesn't want anyone to know right now. She'll kill me if you say *anything*. Understand."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Myra's gonna love this."

"Schanke," Nick stood, peering down into Schanke's face. "You can't even tell Myra. Promise me?"

"Ah, come on, Nick. Myra's my wife for Christ sake. She isn't gonna tell anyone."

"I know that. But for right now . . ."

"Okay, okay," Schanke threw up his arms in surrender. "But you're takin' all the fun out of it, you know?"

Just then Stonetree came out of his office and stopped dead when he saw Nick leaning over Schanke. "Schanke, Knight, in my office. Now if you don't mind," he ordered.

"Oh shit," Schanke mumbled, rising and grabbing Nick's arm. "He wanted to see you as soon as you walked in."

"What'll do now?" Nick shrugged out of his coat, dumped it over the back of the chair, and followed Schanke.

"How the hell am I suppose to know? I haven't seen you for two days, remember?"

Stonetree sat behind his desk, hands clasped with fingers entwined. A serious scowl greeted them as they entered. "Close the door behind you Schank," he ordered. "Knight, sit."

"Yes, sir," Nick draped himself in the chair facing the desk as ordered and looked directly at the Captain.

"Did I or did I not *order* you to go easy on Jonathan Green?" Stonetree asked.

"You did," Nick replied innocently, "and I did."

"Well then, maybe you can explain the call I received from the Mayor, the call I received from Crown Prosecutor's office and the call I received from the Solicitor General's office all accusing you of harassment?"

Nick's mouth dropped open, and for once, he couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Now, wait a minute, Captain . . ."

"You stay out of this, Schanke," Stonetree's eyes never left Nick's face. He held up his index finger and pointed it directly at Nick. "I told you to take it easy on him!"

"I did!" Nick exclaimed finally in his own defense. "Look, Captain, I never accused him of *anything*, I only asked him the list of questions you and I talked about on Saturday."

"Sounds like a guilty man, if you ask me," Schanke noted, as he leaned against the wall. Stonetree glared in response, so he quickly added, "Well, if *not* guilty, then someone who's hiding something. Maybe his girlfriend's more involved than he's letting on."

Stonetree leaned back in his chair and was silent for a few seconds looking at both Schanke and Knight. "What's he like?" he finally asked softly.

"Green?" Nick took a deep breath when Stonetree nodded. "Smart. Wiry. Cool; a very, very cool customer."

"Describe him?" Schanke asked quietly.

"About six foot, maybe a little bit more; brown hair, very blue eyes, eyebrows very low on his forehead and a straight, almost cruel mouth. Slim, fit; elegantly dressed. Same one we got at the restaurant, why?"

"Could be our man, Captain," Schanke had pulled out his notebook and began flipping pages. "Here it is," he said finally, "the Lascombes swear they saw a man exiting the room next to them, *after* Mrs. Lascombe saw the deceased enter earlier with Marnina Maxwell. They said he was tall, about six feet, and had light brown hair."

"They didn't see his face?" Nick asked as he turned to look at Schanke.

"Naw, just his back. Couldn't have been the deceased, he had black, curly hair and was on the short side; they swore this guy was tall and definitely had brown hair. They said he had a black trench coat and a black fedora hat on at the time. I'll lay you odds that we'll find those items in Mr. Green's wardrobe if we got a search warrant." He looked hopefully to Stonetree.

"Not enough grounds," Stonetree answered quickly. "We'd have to be pretty damn sure it *was* Green and I'd have to fight all the way for it. That man has friends in high places."

"Maybe not," Nick interjected. Stonetree looked at him with questions unspoken. "The Lascombes positively identified Marnina Maxwell as being with the deceased on the night he died."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, Maxwell and Green live together in Rosedale. What if we got the warrant to search the home of Marnina Maxwell instead of Jonathan Green?"

"Bingo!" Schanke took a step toward Stonetree's desk, stopping behind Nick's chair. Resting a hand on his shoulder, he gave it a gentle squeeze of encouragement and continued, "Perfect Captain. It'd work, you know it would, and we've got grounds now. Marnina Maxwell can be placed with the deceased the night he died. So okay, so maybe she didn't do it herself, but maybe she did and Green's covering it up. Or, maybe, Green did it for her. Anyway, I'll bet you their things are all mixed together—search one and you search the other."

"Why?" Stonetree asked, looking first to Schanke then to Knight. When neither responded, he continued, "What's the motive, Detectives? Why would one of the most respected members of this community cold-bloodedly murder a . . . a sales representative for a pharmaceutical house? For what? What would he gain?"

"Drugs?" Schanke suggested and when Stonetree looked skeptical he rushed onward. "I don't know. Maybe, maybe Maxwell's a nymphomaniac and Green committed a crime of passion . . ."

"Schanke, you're . . ."

"So okay, so maybe I'm reaching." Stonetree had raised his eyebrows but before he could finish Schanke rushed on. "We gotta question Maxwell. But I'm warning you, Captain, if we don't go there with a search warrant to do both at once, it might be a longer day in hell before we get a second chance."

"What's that suppose to mean, Detective?" Stonetree suddenly sat a little straighter, his displeasure evident.

"Just that money talks and perps walk. With their money they can stonewall us for some time to come. Enough money and they could push us off until the case is cold and almost buried." Schanke leaned back against the filing cabinet and folded his arms over his chest. "It's happened before," he added quietly, "and you know it has."

"Not on my beat, Detective Schanke," Stonetree admonished, "and it *never* will. I'll get you your warrant, but remember this," he pointed to Schanke, "you'd better never pull that shit again. Hear me?" When Schanke nodded in agreement he continued, "Good. I'll let you know when the warrant's ready. Now, get out of here and get back to work and let me do my work." He turned and picked up the telephone receiver, officially dismissing both Schanke and Knight.

They rose, quickly left closing the door quietly behind them and were silent for a few moments as they rearranged papers on their respective desks.

"What was *that* all about?" Nick asked.

"Happened about six years ago, way before your time," Schanke began . . .

Nick let Schanke ramble on about something that happened before he'd become a member of Metro PD, even before he'd moved to Toronto. At any other time he would have been interested and would probably have contributed his own opinions, but he was finding it hard to focus on anything but Natalie and the baby—*his* baby. Piece after piece would slot itself into the puzzle as he remembered more and more about what had happened with the dream doll.

He looked over to Schanke and tried to picture him as the vampire of his nightmare and found it very hard to believe. He closed his eyes only to watch himself stumble into the loft, cold and wet, hurt and hungry. He could feel it again, but it wasn't the familiar hunger for blood, that incessant need or thirst. No, this was something entirely different, an emptiness that made him dizzy and weak. He'd opened his clenched hand—there was a stinging pain from slivers of glass embedded in the palm. How had he managed that particular feat?

Janette's! Like a stone skipping across a pond, the ripples of memory ringed outward until it encompassed the whole tragic episode. He remembered the brawl at the Raven. And he also remembered how mad Janette was the last time he'd seen her. He had to get over to the Raven now and apologize, before her temper got worse.

"Schanke," he suddenly stood and grabbed his coat, "I'll be back. I have to see Janette."

"Are you crazy?" Schanke grabbed Nick's arm as he passed, stopping Nick's forward motion. "Stonetree is out for your butt and you want to cut out to see your . . . girlfriend? Isn't Natalie enough?" Scorn laced his voice and his face creased in disgust.

"It's not what you think, Schanke, believe me. Janette and I are very old and very close . . . friends. And that's *all* we are, friends." The 'friends' angle was a stretch, he knew, but in a sense, it was true. Schanke would never accept their real relationship just as he would never believe that Nick was a vampire. It was better, safer, for him to not know in any case.

"Cover for me, please?" he asked. "Tell Stonetree that I had to go dig out my car before it was towed or something."

"How'd you get in, anyway?" Schanke let go of Nick's arm and stood, blocking his path.

Nick edged around toward the door, thinking fast. "I . . . I walked. On my way in I found a couple of kids willing to start shoveling me out. I'm parked in front of Natalie's apartment house and they're real strict about parking in that area. C'mon, Schank, I really do have to rescue the Caddy." The last was the absolute truth and the more he thought about it the more plausible it felt to fly over to Natalie's, pick up the car then drive to the Raven. "I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours, cover for me?" he asked again.

"Get out of here, Knight, before I change my mind," Schanke shook his head in amazement. "Tell Natalie I said hello. You are going to stop in and see how she's doing, aren't you?"

"Can't," Nick said, as he shrugged into his coat, "she went back to work tonight. Thought I'd give her a call when I got back. Thanks." He grabbed Schanke's arm as he went toward the door and gave it a brief squeeze. "I owe you one."

"You owe me more than that, pal," he heard Schanke call, as he rushed out the door. He went down the steps to the street and started walking quickly in the direction of Natalie's apartment. A few minutes later, he turned into a dark alleyway, raced ahead, then quickly took to the sky. Within minutes, he'd landed behind Natalie's apartment house.

Wading through the knee-high snow, Nick muttered to himself, "Feel more like Clark Kent!" He

rounded the corner and spied the Caddy, then watched as the snow plow edged around it, leaving in its wake a mound of about two feet of packed snow. "Damn!"

He only looked once up at Natalie's darkened window before he pulled the shovel from the trunk and started to toss the heavy accumulation of snow further out into the road, back onto the sidewalk—anywhere away from the car. He was a mess by the time he'd finished, started the car, and pulled away from the curb. His mood was only lightened by the fact that Natalie was feeling better, back to work and they, he and she, were going to have a baby. All in all, it was pretty incredible and he was still high on the feeling.

He was actually whistling when he entered the Raven and failed to notice that Alfred, the bouncer, was not at all happy to see him back so soon. He didn't even notice that Alfred followed him, discreetly of course, as he made his way to Janette at the bar.

"Hi." Nick gave her his most winning smile, all the while knowing he had a lot to make up for.

"Nicola," Janette eyed him up and down, taking in the wet jeans, the salt-stained boots and mussed hair, "you look, positively . . ."

"Enchanting, yeah, I know," he said as he leaned forward to kiss her cheek and frowned when she pulled back, out of his reach. "You're mad, and you've a right and I'm sorry, but—"

"But what?" Janette stubbed out her cigarette and reached for her glass, "Really, Nicola, with you there is always a 'but.' 'But, Janette, *cherie*," she mimicked sarcastically, "you don't understand. *Cherie*, I am sorry.' Nicola, you are *always* sorry for something!"

Nick watched her and knew from past experience that if he didn't act soon *she* would be the one starting a brawl, upsetting mortal and vampire customers alike—there was nothing in this world like two vampires slugging it out. He quickly wrapped his arms around her and started nibbling on her ear. "*Mon petite*," he crooned, moving his mouth from her ear to her neck. He could feel his eyes beginning to change and glow, the fangs aching to be released, starting greedily to descend.

"Stop!" Janette pulled out of his embrace. "You think you can get around me so easily, don't you Nicola? But *not* this time. I am still *very* angry with you!"

She was breathing rapidly, her eyes narrowed to mere slits as she looked at Nick. Her mouth was cruel as her wrath surfaced once more and her tone was harsh and menacing. "You only seem to show up when you need something or want some information. You never come just to see *me*. No more, get out! Leave now before I have Alfred here," she stopped, indicating the bouncer with a nod of her head, her eyes now blazed golden, and her voice was low and threatening, "throw you out . . . again!"

"Let's not make more of a scene that we already are," Nick counseled sternly as he turned back to Janette. "This has gone far enough," his tone of voice was serious and professional. "I need to speak with you . . . alone. May we go some place private?"

He had never seen Janette so angry with him. Well, not in a very long time anyway. The heavy metal rock music blared and the strobe lights hurt his eyes. He dropped his arms to his side and stood, looking into her eyes. They knew each other so well, perhaps too well. He took a deep breath, then edged beside her stool and leaned against the bar. He motioned for the bartender and when he came over, he said quietly, "I'll have the same as what the lady here is drinking."

He could feel Janette watching him, as the bartender poured him a glass of blood-wine, then left to serve another customer. Nick picked up the glass and brought it to his lips. He hesitated for only an instant, then drank. His head momentarily reeled from the human blood and the wine as he felt the effects immediately. But he drained the glass and motioned for a refill.

Janette was silent as the seconds ticked by, seemingly oblivious to anything but the familiar vampire

in front of her. Finally, with a nod of her head she agreed, rose and walked carefully toward the back room office.

Nick picked up the two full glasses from the bar and followed her. He set them down on the desk then turned and closed the door, shutting off the noise from the dance floor. The room seemed utterly still and quiet; Janette sat behind her desk, watching him. He could tell her anger was close to the surface, threatening to spill into rage. He sat down on the couch against the wall watching her watch him.

"Have you ever heard of a Madam Xanadu?" he finally asked, enunciating each word carefully.

"Of course I have," Janette snapped as she picked up her glass and took a sip. "Everyone's heard of her. Everyone knows about what she professes to be. Why?"

"I—" Nick looked down at his boots and clicked his toes together, wondering how he was going to make her understand. "I got a dream doll from her."

"You did what?!" Janette sat very straight in her chair, her expression altering between amazement and consternation. Her hands trembled slightly as she took a cigarette from the box on her desk and lit it. "When?"

"A couple of months ago."

"So that's . . . ?"

"Yeah," Nick sighed and leaned back. "Janette, I thought it would help make me mortal."

"Nicola," Janette sighed and shook her head, "sometimes you are such a fool." She lifted the goblet to her lips and took another sip of the blood wine. "All right," she said as she took a drag on her cigarette, leaned back in her chair and let the smoke slowly escape from her mouth, all the while watching Nick. "I know about the brawl here at the Raven," she finally said, "but I need to know what preceded it or I will throw you out of here myself."

It took Nick about a half hour to explain how he'd blackmailed Madam Xanadu into giving him the doll, the nightmarish world he existed in for the two weeks he'd had the doll in his possession, and the erotic fantasies he and Natalie had been having ever since.

"Are you saying," Janette asked, her voice rose, a bit incredulous, "that you and Natalie made love and you didn't . . . ?"

Nick smiled, then grinned, then laughed. His joy was so obvious and so overwhelming that he couldn't contain it, he didn't want to. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you. I made love to Natalie as a mortal, Janette. For a number of hours I was mortal. I was in pain at first—I had glass slivers in my hand from the fight here, then I was hungry. I was starving. Janette, do you remember what it's like to be hungry for real food?"

He rose and began pacing the small confines of the office, wanting to open the door to let the cigarette smoke out and some fresh air in. He decided against it as he could hear the throbbing beat of the music and the chattering of the patrons of the club. Janette was his best friend, perhaps his only real friend, yet he was finding it difficult to tell her what he felt she had a right to know.

"I really am sorry about the fight. Please," he looked to her and pleaded, "believe me. I would have come by sooner only I really didn't remember. Madam Xanadu was there when I woke up—"

"And Dr. Lambert? Where was she?" Janette's voice was oily smooth and her eyebrows rose in amazement.

"Still sleeping. I don't know why I woke up then. I," Nick stumbled over the words, the pain of admission, the error, the stupidity of what he had done now made sense. Why hadn't he seen that before? "Anyway, she was there and I was . . . back in the dark and . . . and, I"

"Spit it out, Nicola," Janette lit another cigarette and waved it in his direction. "You're trying my

patience with all this hemming and hawing. What *exactly* did you do?"

"She, Madam Xanadu, offered to make us forget—forget about my being mortal, forget about," he slouched back down on the couch, took a deep breath, finally continuing, "forget everything."

"But now you remember?" Janette questioned, as she studied Nick. She waited for Nick to continue—when he didn't, she questioned softly, "What are you leaving out, my Nicola? What happened to make you remember after all this time?"

Nick looked up at Janette and smiled. His happiness suddenly was uncontainable. He wanted to pick her up and swing her around and hug her tightly. Instead of doing it, he sat still on the couch and smiled.

"What?"

"Natalie's pregnant."

"What . . . did . . . you . . . say?" Janette stuttered.

"Natalie and I are going to have a baby." He laughed and beamed as only an expectant father could.

"That's impossible," Janette countered. Her face was drawn and she scowled. "No, I've never heard of such a thing. A vampire *cannot* . . ."

"But, don't you see?" Nick laughed. "I wasn't a vampire then—I was *mortal*!"

Janette leaned back into her chair and silently studied Nick. Two, three, four minutes passed in silence with Nick sitting in front of her. He stared at the ceiling with a silly grin on his face. "Nicola," she began then stopped. "Nicola, look at me!"

Nick finally straightened from his slouch. "Sorry," he said, "I still can't get used to the idea of . . . fatherhood. Me, eight hundred years old and I'm going to be a father!" He laughed and banged his hand down on the edge of the couch. "Can you believe it?"

"No," Janette sighed, "yes. No." She couldn't quite make up her mind at this point. A thousand emotions spun threw her head and there were numerous questions she wanted to ask. But the joy on Nick's face stopped every one. All she said was, "Just don't look to me to baby-sit."

Nick laughed again as he rose from the couch and went over and picked Janette up out of her chair. He hugged her, tightly. "Please, *cherie*," he whispered in her ear, "be happy for me?"

She hugged him back as best she could. "I am happy for you, Nicola. Now put me down."

Nick did as he was told, but continued to hold her and stroke her hair. "It's just so—" he began, before Janette interrupted.

"Nicola." Janette pulled out of the embrace, took his hand and led him back to the couch. She sat and stared at him for a few moments. "Nicola," she began again, "I have never heard of such a thing happening—which doesn't mean that it can't happen, as it obviously has happened. But—"

"But what?" Nick interrupted, as he eyed her suspiciously. He was only too aware of her feelings for him, her antipathy for his desire to be mortal and his attachment to Natalie.

"If this . . . thing has happened and the baby is truly yours, have you given any thought to the danger to . . . Natalie?" Janette spoke her name as if it were a foreign word that she'd never used before.

"Janette," Nick answered quickly, "of course the baby's mine. But, what danger? What are you talking about?"

Janette looked into his eyes for a second or two, then with a slight shake of her head she seemed to make a decision. "Nothing. It's just—never mind. Come," she sighed, and rose quickly, heading toward the door, "it's time you got back to work and I have a club to run."

"Janette," Nick had followed. Grabbing her hand he brought it to his mouth to kiss her fingers, his gazed locked with hers. "Am I forgiven?" he asked.

"Aren't you always?" she sighed, pulling free and opening the door.

"No," Nick answered with a devilish smile lighting up his face, "not always this soon. Sometimes it takes you centuries!"

"Get out of here," Janette playfully hit his arm, "but don't be away so long," she ordered.

"I promise," Nick bent and kissed her cheek. "I will see you soon."

Light of heart, Nick weaved his way through the mob of dancers. Business was good at the Raven, Nat was feeling better and back to work, they may be making some headway on the murder investigation, and Janette had forgiven him before the turn of the next century. Life was looking up all of a sudden.

He was oblivious to the small, chestnut-haired female vampire who watched him from the back corner of the bar. He never even looked in her direction as he opened the door. He returned to the cold, winter evening and headed back to the station.

Chapter Eighteen

The continuous pounding beat of the music was giving her a headache, but she persevered and waited. The noxious smell of stale beer and alcohol combined with the smoke of too many lit cigarettes upset her system, but she waited. The sultry aroma of human blood from the mortals vying for the attention of the enigmatic vampires was nearly overwhelming, yet still she waited. She waited for Janette.

Marnina sat at the back of the bar and watched as Nicholas weaved through the crowd, carefully making his way to the door. She noticed a jauntiness to his step, a lift of his proud chin, and the small smile which refused to be hidden. She, too, smiled at the realization that for some reason as yet unknown to her, Nicholas was truly happy for once.

She didn't start when she found Janette standing next to her, merely raised her eyebrows questioningly. "He seems . . . happy?"

"Hmmm," Janette murmured taking a sip of blood-wine. She set the glass on the bar and motioned for a refill. "I tend to drink too much of this stuff on occasion," her tone was friendly and she smiled mischievously as the bartender hurried to serve someone else. "He thinks I have a drinking problem." She glanced at Marnina with her own eyebrows raised.

Marnina had watched the young, muscle-bound mortal behind the bar. There was a twinkle in her eye. "Oh, such youth," she sighed. "Good looking? Yes, definitely. Good physique? Magnificent! But just a trifle deficient intellectually?"

"Just a trifle," Janette quipped, and they both laughed. "But he is good for business, and an excellent bartender." She turned and studied Marnina, "What brings you back to this part of town?"

The laugh lines disappeared on Marnina's face as she slowly turned the glass of untouched wine. She looked toward the door with a faraway gaze, and for a slip in time the music, the crowd, the vampire next to her no longer existed as her thoughts moved elsewhere. With a slight shake of her head she pulled herself back into the present.

"I would like to purchase a case of human blood from you." She turned to face Janette, shedding the playful girl-talk of only seconds before. "I thought I would not need to make provisions so soon—however, something tells me that I will have a need sooner than I expected."

"If you plan to bring someone across, surely you will need more than a case," Janette's tone turned business-like.

"That may be true but," Marnina paused and again regained that far away look. "A case will last until we arrive at a proper resting place, one that is—"

"Far away from Toronto?" Janette interrupted, finishing Marnina's sentence for her.

"Yes. Quite far from Toronto. Will you be able to do this?"

Janette silently contemplated the glass of blood-wine before her, taking a sip, twirling the contents and holding it up to the light, then setting it back on the bar. "Why should I?"

"Ah," Marnina breathed. Janette rarely did favors unless there was some benefit for her. What could Janette possibly want that Marnina would be willing to part with? Money? Men? Jewels? "The Dragon's Eye necklace?" she asked softly.

Janette took a slight intake of breath. "Where?"

"Singapore. Several years ago I met a collector of rare . . ."

"Have you seen it?"

"Mmmm, they are beautiful, are they not?"

"The pearls, are they intact?"

"Yes."

"The rubies, have any been replaced?"

"No, they look the same. How *did* you lose track of it in the first place?" Marnina asked smugly.

Janette nodded toward the bartender. "The one I was with at the time was a trifle *more* intelligent than I thought. The collector—is he still . . . available?"

"Of course." Marnina smiled. "And it would not be difficult to put you in touch with him. Do we have a bargain?"

Janette's eyes narrowed. It took only milliseconds for her to agree. "A bargain, yes. Now, who is he?"

Marnina chuckled as she opened her purse to dig out her tiny filofax, with its accompanying pen and paper.

Chapter Nineteen

Nick was on a manic-depressive roller coaster ride; higher than the sky at the thought of a *real* family then swiftly plunging in a downward spiral with the realization of the responsibility it entailed. It was difficult to keep Nick's mind on business, but Schanke did his best.

"So," Schanke leaned back in his chair plopping his feet on the desk, "time ticks on. Wanna take bets on when the warrant comes down? I'd say six a.m. and Green will already have his lawyer present and we'll get diddly-squat."

"Nah, I never bet on sure things," Nick smiled. "You know, if we're lucky, maybe the Captain can keep this quiet. We got someone watching the house, right?"

"Yeah. I pulled Mayerwhite and Schoenberg off a robbery detail right after you left. They're one block over but have the house and driveway in sight."

Nick got up and walked to the window, peering out into the very dark, starlit night. "What's the weather forecast for tomorrow?"

Schanke also rose and went to stand behind Nick. "You worried about the daylight?" he asked softly.

"Hmm," Nick murmured. "If it's overcast there shouldn't be too much of a problem, but it looks pretty clear out there to me."

"Well, bucko," Schanke looked at his watch, "you still got a couple more hours to dawn, I wouldn't worry too much about it. As soon as that warrant comes down we'll be history. Bing, boom, bang and we'll be in the house searching to our heart's content."

"Yeah," Nick said as he turned back toward his desk, "let's hope so. Meanwhile . . ."

"Back at the farm," Schanke continued, "I'm hungry. Wonder if there's anything to eat around here?" He moved from the window to his desk and pulled open drawers and throwing candy bars on the desk top: Snickers, Mars bars, etc. All in all, he had about ten treats in front of him. Looking over his cache of emergency supplies, he sighed "Should've had Myra pack me a lunch like she wanted."

Stonetree walked out and eyed the mound with distaste. "You're gonna ruin your teeth eating all that junk, Schanke."

"You should know by now, Captain, he's a slave to his stomach." Nick laughed. "What's the word on the warrant?" He looked up at Stonetree, as he leaned along the edge of Nick's desk.

"Should be here in about an hour or so. Prosecutor's Office had to wake up Judge Norbert to get it signed and let me tell you, he wasn't happy about it. I've been on the phone with him for over an hour giving just cause as to why this thing couldn't wait until the court opened for business in the morning."

"What finally convinced him?" Nick asked, as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Oh, probably the fact that Maxwell was definitely implicated but that she and Green live together. I just *happened* to mention how much influence Green has *and* that Green may be implicated himself, and wouldn't it be unfortunate if Green started throwing his weight around to delay the search. I went on and on about it 'til I think he signed it just to shut me up so he could get back to sleep." Stonetree had stood in front of Nick's desk with his hands in his pockets and yawned. He looked tired with his shirt rumpled and his tie, which had probably been stuffed in his pocket hours before, missing. "Someone from the Prosecutor's Office is on his way over with it now. Any word from the team watching the house?"

Schanke rose. "I'm gonna check on them now. Whatta we do if Green leaves?" he asked, looking to

Stonetree.

"Let him go," Stonetree replied. "What else can we do? He's not mentioned at all on the warrant. Maybe it's even better he's not there. Whadd'ya think, Knight?"

"Yeah, probably," Nick was still leaning against his desk with his arms folded. "He'd probably stonewall the search until his lawyer showed up anyway. The one thing we don't want to do is to give him a chance to hide anything or get rid of anything. Let him think it's business as usual."

"Yeah, probably right," Schanke muttered as he left the room.

About an hour or so later, Schanke and Nick found themselves parked in the driveway of Sixty-Three Roxborough Street East. The sun had not yet begun to rise over the horizon. They'd been informed that Green had driven away approximately a half hour before, and they observed that lights were still on in the downstairs portion of the house. They got out of the Caddy, trudged to the front of the house and rang the bell. It was several minutes before it cautiously opened and a young woman stood in the doorway.

"Yes? May I help you with something?" The woman appeared to be in her mid-to-late twenties and matched the physical description of Marnina Maxwell. She was dressed in black slacks and a burnt-orange cable knit sweater. Her feet were bare and her chestnut hair was held back by a large tortoise shell clip. She stood in front of them with the door open, not bothered by the cold February air.

Nick and Schanke had both pulled out their badges for her inspection, but it was Schanke who spoke first. "Marnina Maxwell?"

"Yes."

"Detectives Schanke and Knight, Metro PD We're investigating a recent homicide and . . . may we come in?" he asked, as he stamped his feet "It's pretty cold out here and we need to talk with you."

"Of course." Marnina opened the door wider and stepped aside, allowing the two men entry into her home.

Nick felt the hairs at the nape of his neck bristle as he edged past Marnina. He felt her stiffen as he passed so he purposefully averted his eyes and touch. He made his way into the hallway of the house, turned, and watched as she slowly closed the door.

"How may I help you?" She also turned her back to the door, but made no effort to invite them in further, obviously preferring to hold the inquiry to the hallway of the house.

Schanke stepped forward, flipping open his small spiral notebook while he reached into his pocket for a pen. "How well were you acquainted with Michael Calluori?"

"Who?"

Marnina's voice was soft as down feathers and light as air—Schanke had to strain to hear her. "Michael Calluori," he repeated, then went on in defense of her staring silence. "Ms. Maxwell, we have positively identified you as accompanying Mr. Calluori to his room at the Royal York Hotel on the evening of Monday, January 24th."

"Ah," she sighed. She had shifted her penetrating gaze from Schanke to a point further down the hallway and remained silent.

Nick tried to capture her gaze, to force her to speak with them; every attempt met with failure, and she remained unreachable. He coughed and cleared his throat, breaking the stiffening silence.

"Ms. Maxwell," he said, and when she didn't move, he repeated it, louder this time. "Ms. Maxwell!"

Marnina jerked her head back as if she had been struck. "Yes, Detective . . . Knight, isn't it?"

"That's right." Nick reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the search warrant. "Mr. Calluori was murdered sometime between the hours of one and three a.m., Tuesday, January 25th. We have sufficient cause to believe you to be involved in some way and have therefore obtained a warrant to search

these premises. If you'll please follow Detective Schanke to another room, I'll call in the uniformed officers and we'll proceed with the search." Nick handed her the search warrant.

"And what are you looking for, Detective?" She took the warrant and gave it a cursory glance, all the while smiling slightly as if it were a joke of some kind.

"A murder weapon for starters," Schanke replied. "Is there a room somewhere where we can conduct a proper interview, while the officers complete their search?"

Marnina looked from one to the other before finally stepping forward. "This way," she indicated a room further down the hall.

Schanke followed while Nick stood and watched them walk away. He pulled a two-way radio out of his pocket and spoke into it quietly, notifying the team of uniform officers waiting in patrol cars parked in front of the house that they could begin the search.

Time passed slowly, with Schanke and Nick asking questions, then waiting patiently for Marnina's slow, thoughtful replies. She declined the offer to call legal counsel. She knew nothing about the murder. Calluori was alive and sleeping when she left his room about twelve-thirty Monday morning, or so she claimed. She had taken a subway part of the way home, then walked for several miles before hailing a cab. No, she couldn't remember the cab number, the cost of the ride nor the exact time; she claimed to have arrived home somewhere around two in the morning. No, she hadn't met anyone other than the cabbie who would have been able to have given her an alibi; she said that Jonathan, the man she lived with, had been sleeping all the while she was out. When Schanke's eyebrows rose in disbelief, she had patiently explained that theirs was a free and open relationship based on trust and understanding, each completely free to pursue their own . . . interests. Schanke coughed and shook his head.

Nick rose and looked at his watch. "If you'll excuse me?" he said, and looked to Schanke. "I—" he started, but was interrupted.

"The sun will be rising soon—you must be away from here."

Nick, with his preternatural hearing, barely heard Marnina breathe the words. His head jerked upright and he stared at her in disbelief.

"Let me show you to the door, Detective." Marnina had also risen but was halted in mid-stride by the ringing of the phone. She looked questioningly to Nick and Schanke.

"It's all right, I can find my own way out. Answer the phone," Nick assured her.

She nodded and walked to the other side of the room, then lifted the receiver to her ear. "Hello?" Nick heard her say, before tuning her out and turning back to Schanke. "You all right?"

"Yeah, sure. Call you later," Schanke replied. "Looks like we hit a dead end with her. Let's hope Joe and Stan turn up something before Green busts in with his lawyers in tow."

"Yeah," Nick agreed, as he shrugged into his coat. He walked out of the room but turned back for a few moments to stare pensively at Marnina Maxwell. He was sure she was a vampire, but a type of vampire he had never encountered in all of his eight hundred years.

Chapter Twenty

Marnina leaned back against the closed oak door and smiled sadly. Ten a.m. and she could finally bid farewell to Detective Schanke and his small army of diligent searchers. And what had been their reward for all their painstakingly careful prying into every corner of her home? Nothing. They had found nothing. She had known beforehand they would find nothing, which was why she hadn't protested the intrusion into her well guarded privacy.

Padding softly to the study phone, Marnina raised the receiver and punched in the familiar number.

"They are gone," she said softly, then listened before speaking again.

"Jonathan, my love, there was no reason to have the lawyers present. The search warrant was perfectly legal and I can assure you there was nothing for them to find."

Marnina went to the window and pulled a small portion of the curtain to one side. She watched the patrol officers get into their cars and begin to drive away.

"Hmmm," she murmured, looking from the snow covered ground to the bright cold winter sky, then turned back to survey the room. "You may be right, but I really don't think it's anything to worry about." Another pause and she spoke again. "Oh I'm sure they'll have someone watching the house." She began walking around the room with the mobile phone clenched between her ear and shoulder, her hands busily putting the room back to the way it was before the police had come. Not that they had left the house disturbed—they had been careful not to make a mess—but everything was slightly awry, as if the house had suddenly tilted a fraction and all of its contents had shifted.

"No, I don't think so. Tell Francois to go ahead with the transfer from London. I will be in around noon and will want to speak with Girard in Bern first." She listened for a moment, frowning as she plumped the pillows on the couch. "Yes, I realize it will be late for him but it can't be helped. I have to wait for a delivery from my friend, Janette. No," she chuckled, straightening her back, "you've never met her. I'm sure you would remember if you had."

Marnina listened as she climbed the stairs and entered the bedroom she shared with Jonathan. She opened the closet door and gave its contents a cursory glance before making her choice.

"We must think about your replacement as head of the bank if we're to leave soon," she said, she selecting the simple black wool Chanel dress and laying it carefully across the king-sized four poster bed. "I was thinking perhaps Lincoln Davis would be a good choice. He had just been elected to the Board when we took over, many years ago."

Marnina heard the back door open and knew instantly that the housekeeper, Mrs. Light, had arrived. "Jon, Nidra's here, I have to go. I'll see you around noon or so and we can finish the discussion then." She listened for a few more moments before chuckling, "You do my worrying for me. I love you," she said softly then disconnected. She tapped the phone thoughtfully against her palm and her face wore a worried frown.

Sighing, she shrugged her shoulders in resignation. "What will be . . . will be," she muttered, as she made her way back down stairs and into the kitchen. "Nidra, I have much for you to do today."

Chapter Twenty-One

Natalie's eyes squinted together, trying to blot out the tiny beam of afternoon sun light that was inching its way along the edge of her window shade. She lazily rolled onto her stomach, attempting to bury her head in the pillows but found the position uncomfortable. Laying on her side she smiled as she touched her stomach. Pregnant ladies' breasts hurt and she was a pregnant lady! She looked at the clock and moaned—it was time to get up, past time actually. She lay back staring at the ceiling, pondering the new life that was forming within her. If it was a boy, and of course it would be, would she insist on calling him Nicholas after his father?

"Don't think so," she muttered, as she sat up in bed and pulled the comforter up to her chin. She eyed Sydney, who was sleeping peacefully at the foot of the bed. She leaned down to lie beside him and began to pet his gray fur.

"What do you think, Sydney?" she crooned, as she scratched his ears, getting his instant attention. "Bartholomew would be nice. Think Nick would agree to that?"

Personally, Sydney thought food might be nice at that point but scratching ears was good, too.

"Or how about Richard, after my brother. Yeah. Richard Nicholas Lambert." Natalie's fingers stopped in mid-motion. "Lambert? Oh, now there's a new twist to the dilemma." Her hand had stopped just above Sydney's head.

Sydney raised his head and pushed it into her hand. He wanted more scratching.

"Later, Syd." Natalie sat up and swung her feet to the floor, the question of the baby's last name a nagging, persistent thought. A wave of fatigue hit as she began to rise and she sat back down with a thump.

"Oh, God. I'm tired," she muttered, as she lay back on the bed for a few extra moments. "I guess being pregnant is harder work than I thought." She yawned, then struggled upright again.

"Okay, Sydney." She wound Sydney's tail around her fingers. "Better get moving. We need the paycheck."

Natalie pushed herself off the bed and headed toward the kitchen for weak tea and soda crackers. Her stomach was beginning to rebel at being mobile at this hour. It was going to be a very long day, Natalie decided.

It was the between time that was the most restful, peaceful time of sleep—the time of dreams, of nightmares, of wish fulfillment. If it couldn't happen in real life, it could happen nightly in one's dreams.

Except that . . . most vampires didn't dream. Most vampires didn't sleep. They were either conscious, alert, mobile and functional, or they were unconscious, the bodily functions slowed to a near stop in order to rejuvenate itself for another night of hunting. A daily hibernation.

Nick hated the abrupt crashing into waking. He'd always hated it, beginning with the first night—his eyes slamming open, blood surging through his veins and all of his senses alert, on-line and active all at once. It was a momentary sensory overload.

For centuries he'd hated it, so he'd trained himself to gradually bring his body back in tune—to breath normally in and out, and, lastly, to inch his eyelids slowly open, to the welcome twilight of the

night. Most nights it worked. Some days his inner-training faltered and failed, and events of the past crowded in. And some days, he just found himself . . . awake.

Nick was suddenly, abruptly, disturbingly conscious. Someone was coming, something untoward was going to happen. He could feel an ominous foreboding and his heart anxiously skipped a beat.

He rose and slipped downstairs to the refrigerator. Bottled blood was his waking meal. Glass in hand, he gazed around his empty, silent loft. He was struck anew by the stillness and tried to imagine the sound of the laughing, gurgling child that was to come. It brought joy to his face, a smile lighting up his whole being, crowding the foreboding until it was no more. He ambled to the phone and dialed Schanke's home number.

"What did you find?" Nick asked, when Schanke finally came to the phone.

Schanke sounded tired. "Nothing," he answered, "it was a total bust."

"Did Green ever show up?" Nick ran his finger along the rim of the glass.

"Nope. Weird, huh?" Schanke commented. "You know, I expected him to come bustin' in any minute with an army of lawyers in tow. But he never showed his face."

"Yeah, that's a little odd isn't it?" Nick stared at the empty glass for a moment before asking, "Was Maxwell with you the whole time?"

"Yeah," Schanke answered with a yawn.

"What time you finish?"

"Must have been around ten this morning."

"And Maxwell was still up when you left?"

"I told you, Nick," he could hear the exhaustion and exasperation in Schanke's voice, "she was with me the entire time. I never let her out of my sight. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going back to bed for a few more hours of sleep. I'll see you at the station at four, okay?"

Nick paused, frowning. "Must be wrong," he muttered.

"What?" Schanke asked, then yawned again. "Oh, hey, hang on a minute. There was something, but you're not going to like it."

"What?"

"The cab driver that picked up Maxwell on Tuesday morning turned up." Schanke yawned again, then mumbled on. "He positively identified Maxwell; said he picked her up around one am at the corner of Bloor and Bahurst across from the subway station, and deposited her at her door step at approximately one fifteen."

"Damn."

"Yeah, ditto. We just lost Marnina Maxwell as a suspect. Looks like she was tellin' the truth after all."

"Okay," Nick answered, with a sigh. "Go back to bed. I'll see when you get in and we'll start all over again."

"Yeah, later." Schanke broke the connection.

Nick stood for a few moments with the portable phone in his hand. He slowly replaced it in its cradle, then wandered back to the refrigerator to refill his glass.

It was while he was dressing that he heard the buzzer for the door. His heart beat twice in rapid succession and he drew a breath. He could sense the coming confrontation—he hated confrontations. He slipped on his boots and flew to the door.

Nick stared at the monitor for a few moments before pressing the mechanism, allowing entry to Marnina Maxwell. He had taken in her appearance quickly; it was only two in the afternoon and she wore neither a hat, nor gloves, nor sunglasses. Common sense said she couldn't be a vampire and walk in the

sun, yet his preternatural instinct overrode all and said that she was. How was this possible?

He opened the door and the down-like hairs at the base of his skull bristled. "Please, come in." Nick stepped aside, allowing her to pass in front of him.

"Thank you." Marnina's voice was soft and low, her step light and quick. She stood by the piano and surveyed the large, open space of the loft.

"May I take your coat?" Nick asked, holding out his hand. He took the coat and turned toward the closet, adding as an after thought, "Is there something I can get you? Coffee perhaps? Or . . ." He purposely left the sentence hanging, waiting for her to finish it.

"Or blood? Is that what you were going to ask?" The tiny laugh was held back but her lips curled in amusement. "No," she answered as she shook her head. "No thank you. It is not my way."

Nick had stopped and stared for a moment or two, then turned back to the closet and hung up her coat. He was confused. He felt out of his depth yet oddly elated. She was a vampire and she walked in the sun. How?

He had to know.

Marnina watched Nicholas and easily read his every reaction to her presence, his face a mirror to the confusion of his mind. Obviously his master had never taught him the art of concealment. Then again, perhaps he had never chosen to learn the art. She carefully selected the chair closest to the fireplace and seated herself only when he came back into her line of sight, taking his place at the end of the couch.

"Why are you here? What do you want?" he asked, careful with his enunciation.

"So many questions, Detective Knight." Her voice was a perfectly pitched alto and tingled with humor. She smiled. "Yet I sense the question upper most in your mind is how I walk and exist in the sun. Is this correct, Nicholas de Brabant?"

"Who are you?" Nick leaned forward as if to get closer to her. "How do you know my true name? And yes, how is that you walk in the sun without burning?"

"More questions?" She chuckled as she leaned back into the cushions of the chair, steeping her fingers to rest on her chin and stared thoughtfully for a few moments at Nick. Was he ready? Would he ever be ready or mature enough to hear of another way—a way to walk from the darkness into the light, yet still remain a vampire?

No matter. She was here and the time was now. There was no turning back once she began. And begin it she must, for all her senses told her that her time in Toronto was now limited.

"You are a vampire, Nicholas de Brabant—a child of LaCroix. Is this not true?" Marnina asked.

"Yes," Nick whispered.

"And did you not ask for this gift of immortality?"

"Yes, but—"

"No," Marnina quickly interrupted, not letting him finish, "there are no conditions. You requested the gift and your request was granted." Marnina's voice was laced with absolute conviction.

"I wasn't told the price would be so high," Nick persisted. "Had I known—"

Marnina cut him off again. "LaCroix was under no obligation to explain everything before bringing you across. And," she continued thoughtfully, "even if he had, would you have chosen differently? Think of what you were, the year in which you were living.

You were thirty-six years old, a knight returned from Crusade. You had recently recovered from being mortally wounded. You had stared death in the face and won . . . this time. *This time,*" Marnina

repeated with emphasis. "There was plague and sickness at every corner and you did not want to die. You did not want to go through the struggle of dying again, did you?"

Marnina stared hard into the shocked, silent face before her and continued. "So, when this man offered you a way of cheating death, you grasped the hand greedily. Is this not the way it was?"

Nick was stunned, shaken by the truth of all she had said. His head tilted slightly from side to side in denial. "No," he breathed.

"No?" Marnina questioned. "Nicholas, there is no shame involved in admitting a purely human failing. No one *wants* to die. Most just accept it as inevitable, some struggle before acceptance, and some fight it to the end. A few of us have been offered a choice and very few have rejected the gift. So, I ask you again," she persisted, "was this not the way with you?"

The air was still and the silence lengthened until it was taunt.

"Yes," Nick whispered, then repeated it louder as he rose from the couch and paced around the room. "Yes. Yes. YES!" He stopped at the fireplace to lean his head on his arm, his back to Marnina. His shoulders slumped in defeat as he stared mournfully into the empty grate.

Minutes ticked by before Marnina spoke again. Her voice was soft, but her questions pierced to his heart like an arrow. "Is it so terrible to admit that you wanted the gift? That when all is said and done, you have enjoyed existing through time?"

"Enjoyed it?!" Nick exclaimed. "Enjoy—Do you enjoy watching your friends grow old and die, while you *never* change?" Nick shot back as he turned to glare at the woman sitting in his chair. "Do you enjoy loving someone and never being able to touch them because you can't trust yourself not to go too far? Not to kill them in your greed for their blood? Do you enjoy the killing? The taking of human life night and after night?" Nick's voice was harsh and bitter with accusation. "Do you enjoy having a master, someone who controls your every move? Do you enjoy not being able to live your existence the way you choose?"

"You have always controlled your own destiny, Nicholas," Marnina replied. "Don't you see that? As for me," she raised her hand, then let it fall back onto the arm of the chair, "I was the cause of my master's destruction over five hundred years ago. I accepted the responsibility and moved on. I will admit that it wasn't easy and I faltered greatly. But I *did* move on and am better for it. However," she paused and locked her gaze onto his, "never did I deny what I was or search in vain for a way back."

"What are you?" Nick had gone back to the couch and sat down hard when he asked his question. "What, *exactly*, are you?"

"I am a vampire," Marnina answered simply and plainly, "just like you."

"No." Nick choked and he coughed. "No, not like me. Not at all like me or anyone I know."

Marnina's laugh was like the shattering of crystal in the ensuing stillness. "No," she said, "not like you. But a vampire none-the-less."

"But, how—?"

"How do I walk in the light?" Marnina asked as she searched Nick's schoolboy face. "Nicholas, look at my shoes, do they seem unusual to you?"

Nick obediently stared at Marnina's booted feet. He saw that she wore a heeled fur boot, the fur matching her coat. He saw nothing odd about them—many women wore the same thing every day in the winter months. He looked back at her face, her lovely smile, and his eyes questioned.

"You see nothing, do you? But," she asked again, "look closely at the soles. Do they not look a trifle . . . thick?"

"Yes," Nick answered slowly. "So?"

"All my shoes, boots—anything that covers my feet—are lined with my native soil. My homes are built on a foundation of that earth. It is this soil that keeps me nourished. It is," Marnina finally admitted, "my strength to walk in the light."

"That's it?" Nick asked incredulously. "Dirt?"

"No," Marnina shook her head and chuckled, "but that is part of it. A small part." She sighed as she gazed at Nick. "The training is long and arduous. You must truly *want* to walk in the light because you sacrifice a number of your special vampiric abilities to do so."

Nick stared at her, his skepticism plain. "Like what?"

"I can not fly. I can no longer hear your heartbeat and the blood rush through your veins, as once I could. I cannot see for miles, as you do. I do not have the strength of a hundred men readily at my fingertips. Oh," she shook her head sadly, "I am still *much* stronger than a mortal, but only if my anger is let loose and that is a terrible thing to see. I have learned to control my vampire nature. I have learned to go for days without a drop of mortal blood and when I do take it, it is never enough to kill only to satisfy my hunger. My . . . partner is left only slightly weak the next day, but fully satisfied and alive." She raised her eyebrows in mock humor. "I take the small amount I need at the heightened moment of orgasm."

She paused and looked seriously at Nick, commanding his full attention so there would be no misunderstanding of what she was about to say. "Once you have completed the training, you will be impotent, no longer able to direct what blood flows through your veins." She leaned forward and went to grasp his hand but held back. Instead she spoke quietly and quickly. "You will learn other ways to give pleasure. You will learn that the giving of pleasure to others is more important, more satisfying than the kill."

"I don't know," Nick said slowly. "I—"

Marnina continued, without letting him speak further. "First and foremost, you must *accept* your existence as a vampire. Nicholas, you *are* a vampire and there is no way back. Of this I am sure."

"No," Nick denied, "you're wrong. No," he repeated as he rose again from the couch to pace impatiently around the room. "No, I can't accept that, I've found too many clues over the centuries. There *must* be a way back."

"Ah, Nicholas," Marnina sighed sadly. "I am so sorry." She, too, rose and stopped him by the piano; she touched his arm and looked up into his eyes. "Believe me," she said softly, "if there was a way back I would know of it and I *would* tell you. But there is not." Her heart ached for him and she wished with all her being that she could conjure up the answer for which he searched. "There is no magic," she said softly. "There is no special potion you can drink. There is no cure. There is nothing that will bring you back across. You are a vampire and you will stay a vampire until the true death takes you."

Nick pulled out of her grasp. "How can you be so sure? How can you know? What of all that I've discovered? Who are you to tell me that you know for certain there's no way back? Who are you that I should believe you?" The questions had come tumbling out of him, one after another, as he ran from her. He finally stopped and stood with his back against the fire place, glaring at her.

Marnina tilted her head to one side thoughtfully, as she stood her ground by the piano. After a moment or two she returned to her place in the chair, sat, and indicated that Nick should retake his place at the end of the couch nearest to her. "Please," she asked, "sit and calm yourself. I feel the passage of time and of events occurring around us which we cannot, and should not, control. Please," she entreated again, "sit."

Nick took a deep breath, then did as she requested. "Tell me," he asked again, "what are you?"

"Nicholas, I told you—I *am* a vampire, but different from you. Please," she held up her hand in

protest, "let me continue without interruption." When Nick nodded his agreement, she continued. "I was brought across in the late nine hundreds and lived an existence similar to yours until my master died the true death in the late fourteen hundreds. Not long after—in our time sense, not a mortal time sense—I was brought to my benefactress in Rome, for I longed for the true death, but lacked the courage and will to destroy myself. For you see," she sighed and felt the old familiar longing in her heart, "I loved my master greatly and he loved me. It was his love for me that destroyed him."

"I'm sorry," Nick said softly.

"It is long past." She dismissed the matter with a slight wave. "It was my benefactress and her servant who nursed me back into the world of the living. She allowed me to glimpse, from time to time, the world she had inhabited for centuries. A world of light and sound. A semblance of normalcy. Eventually, when I was strong enough to want to call that world my own as well, she began my training, then sent me to her patron who, in time, became mine."

"Who is he?"

"I will call him Maecenas until you are ready to meet him yourself. I am sure he wouldn't mind, as he knew Gaius Cilnius and called him friend. It is he who tutored me and taught me the way of the light and living in peace in the mortal world. He is willing to teach you, as well, when you are ready." She stopped and stared at Nick waiting for his response.

Nick mulled over all that she had said. "Is he the one that told you there's no way back?"

"Yes," Marnina replied. "Nicholas, he has existed for over three thousand years. He is an alchemist of great success and has learned the arts of the Egyptian physicians who lived during the time of the Pharaohs. If there was a way back, would he not have found it by now?"

The shrill ringing of the phone broke the stillness in the air. Nick was surprised to see how much time had gone by when he glanced at his watch as he reached for the phone. He noted that Marnina had also risen, and there was an unexpected look of panic spreading across her features.

"Knight," he answered. "Yeah, Rodriguez, what's up?" He listened for a few moments, then said, "Okay. Thanks for letting me know. Yeah," he added before hanging up, "I'll meet with Schanke later." He set the phone down softly on the coffee table and looked up at Marnina's face. "There's been an accident," he said, keeping his voice level and soft.

"Jonathan is dying, isn't he? Suddenly, I could feel him slipping away." Marnina turned and ran for her coat. "I must go to him—I must be there when the moment comes." She had tugged her coat off the hanger and was shrugging into it. "We will be leaving Toronto soon," Marnina stated simply, "you and I will not have time to meet again."

"Wait!" Immediately at her side, Nick her arm, preventing her from leaving. "I must know," he insisted, "did you kill Calluori?"

"Of course not—I told you that before. He was alive and sleeping when I left him."

"Do you know who killed him?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You're the detective, Nicholas. You find out," she answered soberly.

"All right. But what about Green?" Nick asked, a bitter note creeping into his voice.

"What about him?"

"Do you plan on bringing him across as well? Can't you let him die in peace?" Nick's voice was sarcastic and biting. "Aren't there enough vampires, must you create more?"

Marnina shook her head sadly. "Have you forgotten so quickly what I just told you?" she said,

taking a breath as she buttoned her coat. "Jonathan chose his own path many years ago. He knows," Marnina stopped and corrected herself, "*knew* exactly what *might* happen to him at the moment of death. It is the way of the light, Nicholas. Nothing is certain—he may or may not come across. What I do now is of no consequence to the choice he made many years ago. An informed choice, which he made freely and willingly. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go to him."

She stopped and turned back, staring at Nick for a full minute before speaking. "Think about what I have told you and remember it. When you are ready to learn, I will know and I will come for you."

"How will you know?"

"Nicholas," she sighed, as she pulled on her gloves, "I have followed your life for the last two hundred years. I *will* know. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

She nodded in agreement, then turned back and raced out of Nick's loft through the back door. Nick could hear the clicking of her heels on the steps and he wondered how she knew where to go, since he hadn't told her the name of the hospital to which Green had been taken and she'd admitted to have given up her special hearing. Perhaps it wasn't completely gone—just lying dormant like everything else. He moved to race after her, but checked himself at the door. The sun hadn't set yet and, unlike Marnina, he would burn in the light.

The light. Nick slowly walked back into the room, picked up the remote and pressed the button to inch up the shutters. The bright afternoon winter light streamed through the small space and splashed across the floor. His mind's eye saw himself sitting on the floor, teaching his son to walk, both of them bathed in the morning light.

She'd said the training would be long and hard. Perhaps the master would come here, to Toronto, so he wouldn't miss too much of his son's first years? But could he ever get used to the loss of the powers he so despised? The powers that made him a vampire, but also made him an above-average cop? Was he, could he be, that good of a cop without them?

Nick squared his shoulders in determination. He leaned over the couch, grabbed the phone and punched in the overseas number before he could change his mind. After a mere ten rings or so it was answered with a cautious, "Yes?"

"Harold? Nicholas. I need you to do something for me." Nick spoke rapidly, giving instructions and not allowing time for a negative reply. When it was finished, he gently replaced the phone in its cradle and stood behind the couch.

He had taken the first step toward a normal . . . existence. An existence that included Natalie and their child. A child of magic, even though he'd been told that magic couldn't help. He watched the dying rays of the sun inch their way back across the floor to the slightly opened space the shutters provided, until it was nearly gone.

He was feeling good, proud to have taken even so small a step, and was smiling when the phone rang again. He reached for it, pressing the talk button as he brought it to his ear.

"Knight," he said. Schanke's voice erased his small victory and brought his world to a crashing halt.

"Nick," Schanke said hurriedly, "I'm down at University Hospital. You'd better get down here quick, they've just taken Natalie into surgery . . ."

Nick didn't let him finish but threw the phone to the floor and raced out the door grabbing his coat along the way.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Natalie had been in the preliminary stages of the autopsy of one Mrs. Caroline Harris; seventy-three year old, Caucasian, female, found dead in the hallway of her apartment. She had been dead a week before anyone had gotten worried enough to investigate.

"Poor old lady," Natalie muttered to herself, as she began to pull on the latex gloves. A wave of exhaustion swept over her and she quickly backed up and sat down hard in her chair. She laid her head down on her arm across the desk, closing her eyes for a brief second or two when Schanke swept in.

"Hey, Natalie," Schanke called as the door whooshed shut behind him, "you okay?" He crossed the room and hurried over to the desk, then placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Got so tired there for a minute," Natalie replied, looking up with a wan smile. "I'll be okay. Must be the tail-end of the flu."

"Yeah, right. The flu," Schanke mumbled, then chuckled. "Natalie, that's what happens to a woman in your condition. You gotta take it easy now. I remember Myra—" He'd leaned back against the examination table, careful not to touch its occupant, and crossed his arms across his chest, totally oblivious to her shocked reaction.

"Whadda'ya mean, 'my condition'?" Natalie interrupted, as she sat up straight in her chair. She eyed Schanke with a scowl and rose to face him.

"Well, ah, you know." Schanke stumbled over his words, took a good look at Nat's face, then began to edge along the table. "Ah, geez, Natalie, now don't get mad at Nick—it wasn't his fault. I just, you know—"

"No, I *don't* know." Natalie tore off the latex gloves and threw them in the basket, as she slowly followed Schanke down the length of the examination table. "Why don't you tell me?"

"It really wasn't his fault. I guessed . . . and . . . and he just blurted out that I wasn't suppose to tell anyone, ya know, and I haven't, *honest!*" Schanke began to sweat and made a tentative swipe at his face. "Well, all except Myra, of course," he mumbled softly.

"What, *exactly* have you told Myra?" Natalie folded her arms across her chest and tapped her toe on the floor as she scowled at Schanke. "No use trying my patience on this one, Schank, you might as well come clean, *now*, before I wring your neck!"

"Ah, com'on, Nat. It's no big deal, really." Schanke had made his way around the examination table using it as a barrier between himself and Natalie. "And Nick is *so* happy. You should see his face when he was talking about the baby and all. When are you two going to get married, that's what me and Myra—?"

"Married? Who said anything about getting married? Schanke," there was an edge to Natalie's voice and she grabbed onto the stainless steel table to stop her hands from shaking, "what *exactly* did Nick tell you?"

"Nick?" Schanke was perspiring for real now and he nervously made another swipe at his face with his hand, continuing to talk as fast as he could. "Nick didn't say much of anything, just kinda babbled, ya know?"

"Babbled. Okay. And what *exactly* did he babble about?" Natalie persisted.

"Oh, nothing much. It was me and Myra, see. We just assumed that you and Nick—well, you know—that you two would join the ranks of us married types and then we wondered if you were gonna have a party or just something quiet? Then we thought that, hell, you could use our cabin up by the lake for a honeymoon—that was Myra's suggestion and," he held up his hand, by now his mouth was moving almost as fast as the speed of light and, as usual, he wasn't thinking about what he was saying, "it's not a bad idea, but I told her that you and Nick had already had the honeymoon, know what I mean?" His face fell when he realized what he had just said. "Damn, that didn't come out right, did it?"

"No," Natalie's tone of voice was arctic, "it *didn't*." Natalie took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. At this point she was so angry at Schanke—and, if all truth be told at Nick too—that she was ready to explode . . . which wasn't good. She took another deep breath and silently counted to ten. A little calmer, she made another stab at silencing Schanke's babbling mouth. "Look, Schank," she began, "I know you mean well, but, ah, I really don't want this spread around right now."

"Yeah," he said, heaving an audible sigh. "I know and I'm sorry, I should have waited for you to say something to me. It just came out, ya know? I'm sorry, okay?"

Natalie waited a beat of ten seconds before replying. "Okay. I guess it's understandable, under the circumstances. Just keep your mouth shut, promise?"

"Promise," Schanke readily agreed. Then watched in horror as Natalie suddenly turned deathly pale and doubled over.

It had come out of nowhere, felt like it was cutting her in half, and took her breath away. "Christ," she gasped, as she clutched her abdomen.

"Natalie!" Schanke went around the table and caught her before she could hit the floor. "Ohmygod." He tried to help her stand. "Are you okay?"

"No," Natalie breathed, "I—I'm not okay." She could sense a wetness on her underwear and even though she shivered she could also feel the sweat beneath her arms as it trickled down her sides. "I think . . ." She tried to straighten up, then the second cramp hit.

It wasn't so bad this time and she clutched the edge of the examination table, bringing the world back into focus again.

Natalie took a tentative breath. "Schank, get my coat and purse," she ordered, and pointing to the corner. "Out of the locker, there. Take me to University Hospital's Emergency Room, will you?"

"Let me call 911 or an ambulance—"

"No time." Natalie groaned as another cramp hit, "Trust me. Just get me to the Emergency Room, *now*," she pleaded.

"Yeah, sure," Schanke mumbled, doing as he was told. "Anything you want." He could feel Natalie trembling as he helped her into her coat and tried to think of encouraging words that would help. "It's gonna be okay. I'm here and Uncle Donnie will take care of everything. Okay? Don't you worry about anything."

"Yeah, sure," Natalie mumbled in response as tears trickled down her face. She silently began to pray, *Please, God. Please, don't let me lose the baby.*

The ride to the hospital seemed to take forever and Schanke was good to his word getting her medical attention ahead of everyone who was waiting. In a matter of a half hour or so he was sitting by himself as they wheeled Natalie into the surgical suite. The doctor assured him that Natalie was all right, she'd just miscarried and they were going to perform a D and C to clear the uterus of any lingering debris.

'Debris,' that was how the doctor described the baby that would never be. What was he going to tell Nick? He waited in silence thinking about Jenny, and Myra, and how lucky he was, about the wonders of Jenny's birth a little over eight years ago and what a hard time Myra had. Myra was a strong lady, but so was Natalie—she'd make it.

But what was he going to tell Nick?

Schanke was alone, reaching for the phone to call Myra, then saw Nick. One minute Nick was standing at the elevators, and the next he was barging through the doorway. Looking into his partner's face, he talked as quickly, as quietly, and as authoritatively as he could, knowing that he was trying to get through to someone who looked like he was wired for sound. "She's okay, buddy, she's gonna be okay. Maybe you'd better sit down," he said taking hold of Nick's arm, and pulling him to one of the orange plastic chairs. "I'm real sorry, but—"

"The baby?" Nick whispered, tugging his arm out of Schanke's grasp.

Schanke shook his head, "I got her here as fast as I could, but it was over by the time we arrived."

"My fault," Nick mumbled.

"Don't be stupid, it's nobody's fault. It just happens sometimes, especially with the first pregnancy."

"No, my fault."

"Nick," Schanke grabbed Nick's arm and squeezed as hard as he could, "listen to me." He waited until Nick looked him in the eyes, then continued, talking slowly and firmly. "Listen to me, it's *nobody's* fault. Something's not right and it . . . it just happens."

How was Schanke to know that what he had said was far from comforting to Nick? How was he to know that it was exactly the wrong thing to say, that instead of comforting Nick, he'd only made him feel worse and more guilty?

"What happened?" Nick demanded, scowling at his partner.

"I don't know," Schanke began pacing around the tiny waiting room. "One minute we were talking—"

"Where?"

"At the morgue, where else?"

"What were you doing at the morgue?" Nick's voice rose in timbre.

"What?" Schanke stopped and took a deep breath. "Okay—I went over to see if Nat had come up with anything further that we could use against Green. When I got there, she was sitting at her desk with her head in her hands. I asked her what was wrong and she said she was tired. I told her that a woman in her condition should take it easy, and—"

"You *told* her that you knew she was pregnant?!" Nick asked incredulously.

"Well, yeah. I didn't exactly mean to it just, sorta, came out, you know?"

"Schanke, I could murder you for this. You promised—"

"Yeah, I know and I squared it with Natalie," Schanke raised his hands in surrender, then hunched his shoulders a bit. "Well, I almost got it squared. That was when she doubled over and told me to rush her here, fast."

"It's all my fault. I should have been there for her." Nick slumped into the chair and stared at the far wall.

"Nick," Schanke said, as he watched the dejected look come over Nick's face, "snap out of it. Whatever you're feeling right now, can it. Natalie's gonna need all the strength you can muster, because when she wakes up, she's not gonna be a very happy camper."

A little over an hour passed before the doctor walked through the door dressed in his green surgical

scrubs. Pulling a cloth cap from his head, he called, "Detective Schanke?"

Schanke and Nick rose from their chairs as the doctor came toward them. "This is Detective Knight," Schanke indicated Nick standing beside him, adding, "He's the . . . father."

"Detective Knight, I'm Doctor Feinstein—Dr. Lambert's been asking for you. She's *fine*," he held up his hand forestalling any questions. "You can see her as soon as she comes out of the Recovery Room. We'll want to keep her in the Surgical Out-Patient Wing for a couple of hours, just for observation, but then you can take her home. She's going to be a bit sore and emotional for the next couple of days. This is a very traumatic experience for a woman, sometimes worse than having gone full term."

"She's going to be all right, isn't she?" Nick questioned softly.

"Detective Knight," the doctor indicated a chair and seated himself waiting, until Nick did so as well. "Dr. Lambert is a very healthy young woman. She's going to be fine. It's not unusual for a woman to miscarry with her first pregnancy. Sometimes it takes two or three tries before everything's right and she can carry full term. Right now, she's going to need all the assurance you can give her that it's not her fault that she miscarried, that *she* didn't do anything that caused her to lose the baby—because she didn't. It just happens, and with all our advances in medicine, sometimes we still don't know why."

"No, Dr. Feinstein, I *know* Nat didn't do anything to cause this." Nick looked at the doctor and tried to smile. His mind, his heart told him that he was the cause, it was all his fault and that he should leave now before making matters worse. "When can I see her?"

"In a few minutes," Feinstein studied Nick for several seconds. "Are you going to be okay?"

Nick took a deep breath and released it slowly. "Yeah. I'll make it. When can I see Natalie?"

Dr. Feinstein studied Nick for a moment more before relying. "They'll be moving her to the Out-Patient wing in about an hour or so. The nurse will come for you and you can wait with her there. Is that all right?"

"Fine. Thanks."

Dr. Feinstein rose and walked toward the swinging doors to the surgical suite, but paused and turned back when Nick called him.

"Thanks," Nick said, "for everything."

"You're welcome, Detective. Just remember what I said. It wasn't her fault and it wasn't yours either. It just happens sometimes." He turned walked through the doors leaving Nick and Schanke to themselves.

Chapter Twenty-Three

By the time Nick had finished his conversation with Dr. Feinstein, Marnina began hers with the Medical Director of Toronto Hospital's Emergency Department, on the other side of Toronto. "Thank you for your concern, Dr. Kemper, but I am fine. Jonathan and I have made special arrangements in the event of our deaths. We talked about it and made peace with it. I can assure you that it is not something we took lightly. I will have someone here for the body within the hour."

"Well, it's a highly unusual request, Mrs. Maxwell. All cases of accidental death, by law, have to go through the Coroner's Office. After all, Mr. Green was struck down by a city taxi."

"There will be *no* autopsy, Dr. Kemper. That must not happen, it is," she paused and tried another way, "it is against our religion to desecrate the body after death."

"Your religion?"

"Yes. Jonathan is, or was, a practicing Christian Scientist—you know how volatile they can be. Also, I have here," she paused, reaching into her handbag, and withdrew a rather long legal document, "a copy of Mr. Green's Living Will." She handed the document over to the physician, then leaned back in her chair. "You will note, on the bottom of the second page, it states that in the event of his death his body is to be turned over to me for internment and that under no circumstances is his body to be cut open unless so ordered by the court. Now," she waved her hand gesturing toward herself, "since this was an accident, I am more than willing to sign whatever waiver necessary that will negate holding the City liable for any damages. Will that suit the powers that be, or shall I contact my attorney?"

Dr. Kemper scanned the pages of the will, refolded it and tapped it against his fingers. He nodded as if in agreement. "I think everything is in order, but I'll need you to sign a hospital release form, and I'm sure someone from the City will want to contact you about the insurance waiver. I assume you'll make arrangements regarding the deceased?"

"Yes, of course," Marnina breathed a sigh of relief. She needed to get Jonathan home by daybreak, before the sun caused him to die the true death. "If you will permit me?" she asked, reaching for the phone.

Dr. Kemper nodded, then pushed the phone towards her.

Marnina swung the phone closer to her and quickly punched in the number to the Raven. This, most definitely, was a problem for Janette to solve.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Schanke left when Natalie was moved to Out-Patient, after seeing for himself that she was going to be all right. About four in the morning, Natalie began protesting that she wanted to go home. The hospital staff wanted to keep her until at least mid-morning, but Natalie insisted that she was fine—she was a doctor after all and she should know—and she wanted to go home.

So Nick took her home.

The car ride was silent and uncomfortable—they acted like two strangers riding side by side on an early morning commuter train. She protested violently when Nick wanted to carry her upstairs; *she* was no invalid, she said, she could walk under her own power.

She tried not to cringe when he touched her. Natalie paused momentarily before unlocking her front door, pushing the door open, and walking inside.

"Home, sweet home," Natalie mumbled, as she shrugged off her coat and tossed it on the couch. She went over to the table and picked up Sydney, hugging him tight to her chest. "Mommy's home, sweetie," she whispered, then sniffed. "You know you're not suppose to be up there," she scolded, as a tear trickled out the side of her eye. "Nick, could you make me a cup of tea, please?"

"Sure." Nick had slouched against the edge of the wall leading into the living room, watching her. He pushed himself away and headed toward the kitchen.

"And could you please put some food down for Sydney? There's a bag of dry stuff in the bottom left cabinet."

"No problem," he called, as he filled the kettle full of water and plugged it in.

Natalie headed for the bedroom. "I'm going to take off these clothes and crawl into bed."

"I'll . . . I'll take off then," Nick stuttered, as he let the cabinet door swing shut. "After I put down food for the cat."

"No," Natalie called back, "don't . . . leave."

Nick waited by the door, staring at the furniture in the living room while she undressed and climbed into bed. Finally, when he heard the rustling of sheets, he turned and tried not to meet her eyes. "Your tea'll be ready in a minute. You want something to eat?" he asked, as he walked to the edge of the bed.

"No. No, just sit for a minute," Natalie said softly and patted a place beside her on the bed. "I think we need to talk."

Nick sat and his eyes found a spot on the wall just over her left shoulder. It was a comfortable spot and the beige wall began to blur the longer he stared at it.

"Look at me," Natalie whispered. "Do I look that bad?"

"No," Nick finally said, as he tore his gaze from the wall and his eyes met hers on equal terms. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met. Have I ever told you that?" His fingers found hers—he interlaced them and looked down. Suddenly he couldn't tell where his fingers stopped and hers.

"I'm sorry—"

Nick sensed her sorrow which matched his own and he looked into her face to see tears streaming down her face. "Natalie," he said, as he drew her into his arms, "it's okay."

"I wanted this baby so much. Really," her voice was low and soft, and she hiccuped as she mumbled on. "I really did and once I realized what was happening I tried, Nick, I really tried to do everything right."

"I know you did, Nat. And it's okay, really. It's not your fault, you didn't do anything wrong. It's my fault. I shouldn't have tried magic. Magic never works, I should've known that. It's all *my* fault, Nat. My fault."

He held her and rocked her gently as she cried, and when she was silent he still continued to hold her. A feeling of contentment swept over him, something he hadn't felt in a very long time. Holding Natalie like this was right. It was good. He kept kissing the top of her head and caressed her back gently, trying to soothe her troubled soul.

She pulled out of his embrace and reached for some Kleenex. Natalie blew her nose, then smiled weakly. She leaned back into her pillows and took his hand, kneading his fingers gently. After a few false starts, she said, "I wouldn't have changed anything, you know?"

Nick locked his gaze with hers and questioned only with his eyes. He briefly thought of attempting to erase the memory of those precious hours they'd spent locked in passion, knowing full well that it probably wouldn't work.

Natalie smiled. "Don't even think about it," she said.

"Wouldn't it be better?" Nick asked, all the while knowing that if given the chance he would choose differently this time.

"No," Natalie said quickly and firmly. "No, it wouldn't be better. I *want* to remember that what we had together that one time was good and clean and right. It gives us something to work toward. You were right, Nick."

"I was?"

"Hmmm." Natalie smiled and nodded. "Magic *doesn't* work; we both should've known that." She kept stroking his fingers, holding onto him, not letting go, even though Nick gently tried to pull away. "But now we know that it's possible to bring you back over. We just have to work harder at it. I think—"

"No," Nick interrupted, "let's not kid ourselves. It's not gonna happen." He tried to rise and pull away but Natalie used all her strength to pull him back.

"Yes," she said firmly, "it will. I think that was the message of the dream doll, Nick. That if you want something badly enough and you work hard enough, you *will* get your heart's desire. And—and . . . it is what you want, isn't it Nick? To be mortal again?"

Nick watched his thumb rub against her hand and thought about her question. Was that what he truly wanted—to be mortal again? To go through this pain that wouldn't end, this pain that felt as if it would crush his heart, break it into pieces that would never fit back together again? Was it worth it?

"Yes," he said, lifting his head to look Natalie in the eyes. "Yes," he said again, as he brushed the hair away from her face, "that's what I want."

"Hold me, Nick," she whispered, and he gathered her into his arms. "Stay with me awhile?"

"I'll stay," Nick replied, "until you tell me to go."

"We'll be okay, Nick. We'll make it," she assured him as she pulled him down beside her on the bed and rested her head on his chest. Closing her eyes, she murmured, "We'll make it happen, Nick. I promise."

Chapter Twenty - Five

Marnina boarded Air Canada's flight number 1080, non-stop to Paris at 5:00 p.m. the following evening. It had been a busy, rushed day but she'd been able to get everything done, all the papers signed and a coffin purchased for Jonathan's body. Her lawyers had handled the paper work, allowing Marnina to take his body overseas for internment. His transition would be easier at her chateau deep in the French countryside—she could help him to control the hunger, there. She hadn't forgotten how ravenous one could be when first brought across.

She had awakened Jonathan herself, just after dawn. The case of blood delivered by Janette's minions stood nearby, waiting.

"So," Jonathan's voice cracked, "it happened. I'm part of your world." He gazed around the comfortable, familiar bedroom, lifted his hand, then let it drop in futility on the bed and turned his face away from her.

"Yes, my darling," Marnina whispered, "it has happened just as I told you it might. What do you feel?"

"Hunger." He looked back at her and his eyes had turned golden. His eye teeth had miraculously turned into fangs and he snarled like an animal. "I'm so . . . hungry."

Calmly, she reached to the night stand and picked up a goblet of human blood. It was filled nearly to the brim and the rest of the bottle stood nearby. "Drink," she commanded, as she leaned to lift his head, the goblet resting against his mouth. "It will pass, once you drink your fill. Then we will talk."

Jonathan did as he was told. He drank the rest of the bottle, the whole of another and then another. Finally, he lay back on the bed in exhaustion. "What happened?"

"You ran into the middle of the street. Although the taxi tried to stop, he skidded and you were thrown into the path of an oncoming car. Why, Jonathan? Why did you act so foolishly?"

Jonathan frowned, as if trying to remember what had prompted him to act as compulsively as he done. "A phone call," he finally replied, "yes, that was it. No," he shook his head in denial, "that wasn't it at all." He stared into Marnina's eyes but didn't continue.

"Why?" Marnina asked again.

"It—it," he began, then rolled his head from side to side. He took a breath and tried again. "It was the only way I could think of to get you to leave Canada," he finally admitted softly.

"Oh my love," she sighed. Marnina rubbed his hand and interlaced her fingers with his. "You took an awful chance. What if . . . ?"

"But I did," he answered quickly. "I wasn't afraid. I always knew I'd become what you are. But, what now?" He looked upon her as a student would a beloved teacher, his eyes full of questions, trusting that she would have the answers.

"Now, you will rest, here in this room. It is very important that you not leave it for any reason. That you not stir. That you awaken only to the sound of my voice. Can you, will you, do this for me?"

"Yes," he nodded, closing his eyes, "yes, of course. Marni, why am I so tired?"

"Because I have awakened you early so that you may feed. My darling," she leaned over and gently shook him awake until he blearily focused his eyes on her again, "please stay awake for a few more moments. I must tell you what we are to do, and it is important that you remember and not panic if you

awaken alone."

"What?" he whispered.

"We are leaving Canada this evening," she sat on the bed next to him and held his hand, squeezing hard in an attempt to keep him alert. "I have booked a direct flight to Paris and from there a limousine will drive us to the chateau near Provence."

"Commercial airlines?" Jonathan questioned, and, when Marnina nodded in agreement, he asked, "But we have our own jet, why can't we take that?"

"Because it has engine trouble—the mechanics need to replace an entire engine and I fear waiting. I want to get you away from this country as quickly as possible. I have gone ahead and booked the flight. But, Jonathan—" she hesitated, knowing that he would find the rest of what she had to tell him very unpleasant indeed.

"What?"

"You will be traveling in the cargo hold in a coffin. I know," she added quickly, again squeezing his hand as he rolled his head from side to side, "I know how unpleasant a thought it is. However, if you are well fed before we leave the house, I feel certain you will sleep until tomorrow evening . . . and you are exhausted are you not?"

"So tired," Jon said, as he tried to focus his eyes on Marnina.

"Sleep some now. I will awaken you just before we leave for the airport and you will feed again." She watched as he closed his eyes and lay dormant on the bed, then she sighed in resignation, knowing what was to come.

Marnina prayed that her waking him at various times during the day would allow him to sleep through the long night flight and through the day after that. By then they would be safely ensconced in the chateau and he would awake again on his own the next evening. She would have to teach him not to feed on humans but to be satisfied on a diet of animal blood, for the case of human blood purchased from Janette would not last long.

She watched him sleep for a few more moments before rising and leaving the room. She would have to hurry. The coffin would be delivered shortly and she would have to line it with his native earth if he was to survive the trip. So many things to do, including the packing of clothes, before it was time to leave this house forever.

There was one bright thought shining through all this unpleasantness—hopefully, within the year she would travel with Jonathan to Italy, to the villa of her dear friend, for the next phase of his training.

It had been many years since she'd seen the Count, and although she had kept in contact, they hadn't been in the same room together for well over a hundred years. It would be good to spend time with him again. A renewal of sorts. That thought was a balm that soothed her and would continue to soothe until the year was out.

She heard the doorbell and closed her thoughts to all but what she needed to do to get through the coming day, and night, and the next day to come.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nick slouched on the piano seat, a goblet of cow blood resting nearby, while his hands trickled over the ivory keys, playing a familiar, haunting melody. He'd called in sick, unwilling to face anyone this evening, to answer any questions about his relationship with Natalie, or to hear Schanke's apologies and sympathy. He tuned out all the surrounding sounds—the street noise, the answering machine, even the doorbell. Still, he wasn't surprised to sense Janette's presence in the loft.

"Really, Nicola, if you're going to go into one of these depressive binges, I wish you would call and warn me first!" she scolded.

"Hello, Janette," Nick replied without looking up. "Whatever you want, can it wait? I'm . . . I'm not very good company right now."

"You've rarely been good company lately, *mon cher*," Janette breathed. "What is this stuff?" Janette demanded his attention and was rewarded when he sighed and look up at her.

"What?"

"This huge box I found laying at your doorstep." Janette let it drop heavily to the floor before reaching into the pocket of her leather coat. "And I met a delivery person ringing your doorbell. He said he'd been back several times but there was no answer. So I told him I was a friend and had a key; I signed for it. She handed a large white jeweler's box over to Nick.

"That," Nick nodded toward the large shipping crate resting by the side of the piano, "must be the soil from Brabant I asked Herold to get for me." He'd spoken casually, off-handedly, as he focused on the white box in his hand.

"Native . . . soil? Nicola, has Marnina Maxwell been to see you?"

"Hmmm," Nick murmured, turning the box over and over in his hand. There was pain in his eyes as he set the jeweler's box carefully on the coffee table and reached for the remote to open the shutters.

"Really, Nicola!" Janette exclaimed. "You aren't taking anything she tells you seriously, are you?" When he didn't answer, but continued to watch the shutters inched their way upward to let in the evening light with unfocused eyes, she tried again. "Nicola, what has happened?"

Nick turned, picked up the white box again, opened it, and tossed the top aside. Carefully, he opened the two velvet boxes nestled inside the larger. He stared at the objects as a single blood tear rolled down the side of his face. Janette leaned over his shoulder to see for herself what it was that captured his attention.

There was a small, sterling silver charm carved into a delicate coat of arms and a breathtakingly exquisite Caduceus which lay flat against black velvet, the coiling serpent in tri-colored gold with eyes of small, delicate pigeon-blood rubies.

Janette silently estimated the cost quickly. "Isn't that the Brabant coat of arms?" she asked, pointing to the silver charm.

"Yes," Nick whispered.

"The Caduceus is . . . lovely," she breathed. "For the baby? For your Natalie?" There was a sarcastic edge to her question that was lost on Nick.

"Yes," Nick said, as he snapped the velvet boxes shut. "But not now. Not ever. Maybe . . . Christmas."

Replacing the lid, he tossed the box back onto the table. Nick went to the window, keeping his back to Janette as he leaned against the wall to watch the night sky.

"What? You are not going to reward Natalie for conceiving so fortuitously?" Janette teased "My, my, Nicola, you *are* slipping."

"There's no baby, Janette. Natalie miscarried last night," Nick replied, his voice piteous and full of self-loathing.

"Well, good," Janette snapped. "Now I don't have to worry about attending a tiresome shower or any of that nonsense that children entail."

Nick turned quickly and snarled, "Enough! Get out! Leave . . . me . . . *alone!*"

Janette stood her ground and stared at Nick until he pulled away from her and stalked to the piano and the goblet of cow's blood. He picked it up, drained its contents, stared at the empty glass for a moment, then threw it against the wall with all of his might. It shattered almost to dust on impact.

"Are you satisfied, now?" Janette asked quietly. "Did that make you feel better? Wouldn't you like to hit something?"

"Yes," Nick shouted, then pounded his hands on the keyboard of the piano in frustration. The sound of discord matched his mood. He sat down heavily on the seat and rested his head on the top of the piano. "Oh, God, Janette. It's all my fault."

Janette waited a few moments, until she judged that he was ready to be soothed. She moved closer and sat next to him, resting her hand on his shoulder. "Yes, *mon cher*, in a sense it *is* your fault."

His questioning look was almost comical. "I almost told you that it would not . . . last, but decided against it. *Mon cher*, you were mortal for such a short time," she explained, as she cradled him in her arms. "There was not time enough for your body to completely renew itself. Even *I* know that. The tiny fetus was . . . imperfect and even you know that imperfections do not survive."

She felt him shudder, acknowledging and shouldering the guilt. "But, Nicola, think. Think!" She shook him, took hold of his face in both her hands, forcing him to look and acknowledge her. "Think of the beauty. You *were* mortal. It happened, and no one that I know of or have heard of has come that close before!"

Janette smiled radiantly at Nick and, finally, a tentative smile reached his face as well. "Yeah," he whispered. "I . . . I *was* mortal for a while. That's worth something, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Janette said quickly. Then she paused, biting her lip, and looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Will you tell me something, if I ask?"

"What?"

"What was it like? I mean—" Janette looked down at her hands, then back into Nick's eyes. "What was it like," she whispered, "to make love to a mortal and not be overcome with a hunger for their blood?"

Nick stared at Janette for a few long, tense moments, then gathered her into his arms and embraced her. Looking over her shoulder, his eyes beginning to focus on the near past as he said softly, "It was the most exquisite pain I've felt in the last eight hundred years. I thought I was going to drown and welcomed it; I thought I was being consumed by fire and yearned for it, and when it was over . . . I wanted it again."

Janette sighed. "It is as I remember," she whispered. "That is good."

Epilogue

LaCroix stood under the street lamp staring up at Nicholas' window. He knew that Janette was with him; he could sense their presence and yet shielded his own from them.

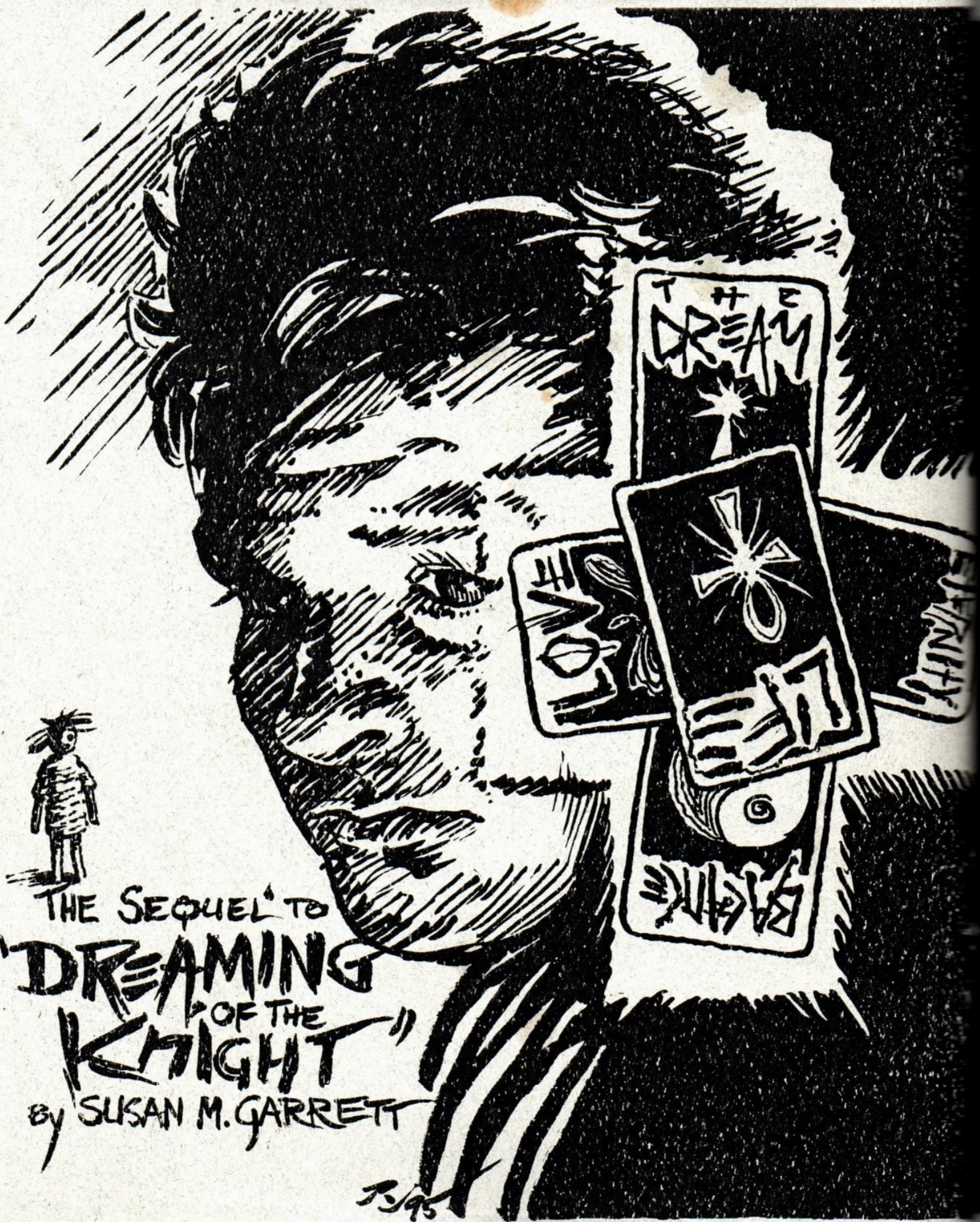
"Ah, Nicholas," he murmured under his breath, "you're such a fool. You're not human and you never will be, no matter what you do. And you even missed the calling card I left—I must remember to thank Madam Maxwell when I see her next!"

He turned and chuckled heartily to himself as he walked down the street, hands in his pockets. In time he would reappear and enter their lives again. After all, he *was* their master.

But not right now.

He wasn't ready.

Finis



THE SEQUEL TO
"DREAMING
OF THE
KNIGHT"
By SUSAN M. GARRETT